

Pak-China Joint Strategy against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Manzoor Khan Afridi¹, Musab Yousufi²

Department of Politics & International Relations,
International Islamic University, Islamabad,
PAKISTAN.

¹manzoor_s01@yahoo.com, ²musab_yousufi@live.com

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the bilateral relations between Pakistan and China during the 1980s Afghan War and explores causes of their joint opposition to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Pakistan and China were among those whose securities were greatly jeopardized. Once again the geopolitical circumstances allowed the common interest to make more strengthen their traditional friendship. Pakistan's western border was vulnerable, where on another side; the Red Army was directly involved. The paper analyzes that how Pakistan's eastern side was in danger as well due to India and its friendship with the Soviet Union. The Indian Ocean was also adding a new threat as the Red Army was trying for access where India could help for a strong footing. China's main concerns were the Xinjiang region and encirclement. Xinjiang region has been an area with restive tendencies, extremism and independence movement. Xinjiang's direct border with Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor was a threat for Chinese sovereignty and stability. The Soviet's entry into Afghanistan had direct impact on the security of Xinjiang where the extremists could rise against the Beijing regime. The strategy of encirclement was another issue for China and was conceived as another episode of the Cold War politics. It was the US plan in early days of the Cold War to encircle communist states, but this time was the Soviet Union. A descriptive-analytical approach has been used in paper and concludes that it was the common interest of mutual security which combined Pakistan and China against the Soviet Union in Afghan War.

Keywords: China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Security, Border, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

The attack of the USSR was a major event in the history of the Cold War which changed the structure of international system. It not only pushed the United States and other countries to halt its way of expansion, but also threatened the sovereignties of its neighbors. With the Soviet invasion, the complicated security situation of South Asia reached its height (Schmeidl, 2002). Another problem to cope with was the Soviet and Afghan supported anti-Pakistan elements in NWFP and Baluchistan provinces. The long-held demand of the Afghan Government for the accession of NWFP or an independent Pukhtoonistan and also a free Baluchistan were alarmed by the Soviet-backed Marxist regime in Kabul. The Pakistan's security was also at stake on eastern border where its archrival and pro-Soviet India, could destabilize and disintegrate it as she did in 1971's Bengal crisis. Islamabad was aware as well about the encirclement plan of Moscow and its access to the warm waters of Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

The Chinese anxiety was stemmed from the fear of anarchy in its restive autonomous region of Xinjiang and the containment strategy of the Soviet. The Kremlin had already posed a grave situation to Beijing by backing the separatist elements in Xinjiang. The geographical proximity of the region with the Soviet Republics was not out of danger. The Soviet

containment plan of China through its allies “India and Vietnam” viewed by Beijing with great concerns. The common interest in the form of opposing the Soviet aggression to ensure security, neighborliness and time-tested friendship of China and Pakistan drew them closer to each other. They were joined by the United States and other countries in the struggle against hegemonism and expansionism. Eventually, a balance of power established once again in the region between the US-Pakistan-China and the Soviet-India. The Soviet support for India in defense, economic and technological sectors was increased. The three countries collaborated closely by establishing the intelligence network and base for weapons’ supply. Pakistan received a huge amount of arms and economic aid by becoming a meeting ground to plan strategies and train the mujahedeen against the Soviet.

Another major development in the period was the Sino-Indian rapprochement and the end of the Cold War. It affected the Sino-Pakistan relations. China no longer take the Pakistani side in the latter’s disputes with India. Beijing viewed New Delhi as a rising economy and huge market for investment. By supporting the uprising in Kashmir at the end of 1980s, Beijing feared the Uighurs’ intensity for demand of an independent East Turkistan. On the other hand the collapse of the Soviet Union removed a major threat from the Chinese mind. The strong ally of India was no more in a position to give her the needed assistance whole-heartedly. However, the Chinese policy to help Pakistan was due to the reason to protect Pakistan from the collapse, particularly after the US refuse of giving military and economic assistance. Pakistan’s stability was the Chinese interest to get access to the Middle East for energy requirements and influence. An unstable Pakistan could not serve the Chinese interests.

PAKISTAN’S CONCERNS

Western Border

In the wake of Red Army’s assault on the Afghan land, the most-threatened area was the Pakistan’s western border with Afghanistan. A narrow strip of the Wakhan valley in the north-western part which was attached with the Soviet territory of Tajikistan Republic was an additional factor. Thus the geographical proximity was an important factor, which at that time, was against the Pakistani interests. A huge number of Soviet forces were the cause of anxiety along the Pak-Afghan long and mountainous border. Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan had been hostile for most of the time. The Durand Line of 1893 had not been recognizing by Afghanistan as an international border. Successive Afghan regimes had already raised the Pukhtoonistan issue on different occasions, in which, intensity came with the coming of Marxist Government in Kabul. It was not only restricted to the demand of free Pukhtoonistan or united with Afghanistan, but also busy in sowing the seeds of hatred and mutiny in Baluchistan’s people against the federation. It is noteworthy to say that the Soviet Union was the country who was backing the Afghan rulers to support the separatist elements in these two provinces. Once again it was a golden and unique opportunity for the Soviets, sitting in Afghanistan, to destabilize the Baluchistan Province and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan (Cheema, 1983); and cause more vulnerability there.

Since the ancient times, the Pukhtoon ethnic group in NWFP and Baluchistan has had historical, religious, cultural, trade and blood relations with the people of Afghanistan. Even some families have had their homes in both the two countries which often cross the border. With the Saur Revolution of 1978 by the communist People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in Kabul and later by the intrusion of the Soviet Army, more than 3 million Afghan refugees entered into Pakistan. Linked by the history-old intimate bonds and being a neighboring Muslim state, it was a moral responsibility of Pakistani Government and people to help the homeless victims of aggression refugees. The inflow of Afghan people not only put the social and economic burden on the shoulders of Pakistani nation but also brought the political

complications. Due to the rough and 2,400 kilometers long mountainous terrain between the two countries, it was totally impossible for Islamabad to stop the way-in of these refugees in the hour of need. Some criminal also stepped-in the Pakistani soil and carried on the activities of destruction and conspiracy.

W. Howard Wriggins has summarized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its impact on the security and society of Pakistan that “the Soviet presence in Afghanistan dramatically transformed Pakistan’s geostrategic situation. Instead of being buffered by the mountains, deserts and ravines of Afghanistan – which for so long had separated Russia from the subcontinent – Pakistan now faced the specter of Soviet troops virtually everywhere along the thirteen-hundred-mile frontier. The shadow of Soviet power hung over the entire subcontinent, as never before. Within months of the invasion, Pakistan was inundated by a flood of refugees. And Soviet aircraft periodically violated Pakistani airspace, occasionally “buzzing” refugee camps well within its borders” (Wriggins, 1984).

Eastern Border

Although the eastern border of Pakistan was not directly threatened but it was also vulnerable to the danger of aggression. The present circumstances fueled the anxieties in the all-time deteriorated and full of suspicions bilateral relations of India and Pakistan. Pakistan needed weapons to secure her sovereignty while India had reservations about the developments in former’s defense sector. On the contrary, Pakistan had long been protested against the superpowers’ inflow of arms to India which was strengthening Indian position as a hegemon in the South Asian region. In this regard, the Soviet Union role was of prime importance. Since the inception of Indo-Soviet friendship and quasi alliance, India had been using the Soviet card to maintain her as a guarantor of peace in the region. The USSR was a godfather for India against Pakistan.

In the Afghan crisis, India did not criticize the Soviet aggression openly. “At the United Nations, Indian Ambassador B. C. Mishra remained silent when the issue came before the Security Council at the request of the U.S. and 51 other states, including many of the non-aligned group. After the issue was transferred to the General Assembly under the “Uniting for Peace” process, Mishra became the first non-Soviet block envoy to speak essentially for the Soviet position” (Horn, 1983). Moreover, both the Soviet and India were accusing Pakistan for the Afghan problem as well. In such a convergence of their interests, Pakistan could not ignore the possibility of joint Indo-Soviet effort to disintegrate it, as had happened in 1971’s East Pakistan crisis.

The period is also witnessed for the high-level exchange of visits between the countries, including the Brezhnev, Indian President Reddy and Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Nicolai Firyubin and Indian Defense Ministry team. As usual, Moscow dispatched a huge amount of arms to New Delhi’s defense field. They were agreed to a 1.63 billion dollar credit to India to buy weapons and equipment over a 10-15 year term. The Soviet leadership also “agreed to sell five highly sophisticated MiG-25 “Foxbat” aircraft, an unannounced number of fast attack boats equipped with missiles, and 100 T-72 tanks with another 600 to be license-produced in India” (Horn, 1983). Pakistan was one of the targets of these supplied-weapons of the Soviet. The Soviet and India were trying their hard to make a sandwich of Pakistan by encirclement.

Minton F. Goldman has observed that Beside “Pakistan’s traditional fear and dislike of communism, its government had been apprehensive about Soviet ambitions in south central Asia, especially in Afghanistan which, in Pakistani perception, had been turning into a Soviet client since the coup of April 1978. Pakistan was in danger of encirclement by hostile

neighbor: a pro-Soviet Afghanistan in the west, the Soviet Union to the north, and a pro-Soviet India to the east and south. Fear of this encirclement undoubtedly was heightened not only by the Kremlin's conspicuous friendship with India and its support of India's side in Kashmir dispute but also by Pakistan's domestic weaknesses, notably its ethnic diversity and conflicts, its economic underdevelopment, and its reliance on foreign sources for sophisticated weapons" (Goldman, 1984).

Indian Ocean

One of the prime reasons of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the southward drive. The Soviet strategists were planning to have a direct access to the warm waters of Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Being the junction of Asia, Africa, Australia and an important passage way for European maritime, many great powers in the past had been competing for influence in the Indian Ocean. The geo-strategic position of the Indian Ocean, the American influence there and the oil-rich Middle East attracted the Soviets as well. The Soviet Union had given a high priority to Southwest Asia where she had political and economic interests. To achieve their grand strategy, the Soviet policy makers were using Afghanistan as a stepping stone to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. The possible route was through the Gwadar Port of Baluchistan in Pakistan. Here also Pakistan Military had to fight war on the two fronts; one by the joint Soviet-Afghan in the west and another with India in the east. "Even if the Soviets had no intention of making a direct move against Pakistan, the danger existed that a war that dragged on could spill over, drawing in Pakistan as a combatant. A victory by the communists would leave a permanent border threat, especially since it was likely to include an indefinite Soviet military presence in Afghanistan" (Weinbaum, 1991).

The Soviet-Afghan created problematic situation in Baluchistan had produced fears in the Pakistan's military and civil leadership that the fall of Baluchistan would certainly leave the Red Army for presence in the shape of naval base in Arabian Sea. The USSR move was not acceptable for a Western ally, Pakistan and also for Arab States, which were mostly anti-Soviet. "The proximity of Afghanistan to strategically valuable ports located near the Gulf of Oman and Straits of Hormuz, especially Gwadar in Pakistan and Cha Bahar in Iran, increased the seriousness of the invasion.... In fact, the fear that the Soviets might have been inclined to meddle in Baluchistan, either for the purpose of bringing Soviet influence to the shores of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, or as a punitive lever vis-à-vis Pakistan, was hardly far-fetched" (Hilali, 2005).

The Soviet planners had already drawn a map connecting the Gwadar Port with some areas of Afghanistan, leading to the Merv city of Turkmenistan Republic. In the wake of such motives of the Soviet, Pakistan's fear of encirclement was duly authentic to believe. The southern part was important for Pakistan to keep contact with the Muslim neighbors of the Arab states. In the case of Soviet presence there, it could be hard to secure the energy supply route. Moreover, the fear of the Indian collaboration with the Soviet in Indian Ocean was much troublesome for Pakistan.

To sum up, the Soviet Union has aspirations of expansion driven by the geopolitical considerations as the Imperial Russia did before it. "Moreover, the allures of pulling Pakistan into its orbit are especially enticing". This game of Kremlin was played on planet to get rid of "capitalist encirclement" where the aim was to break "the chain of hostile land powers around the USSR and its contiguous allies, acquisition of access to the open ocean unencumbered by foreign straits or pack ice" and "establishment of a salient that outflanks India on the one hand and the critical Middle East energy reserves on the other" (Arnold, 1986).

CHINA'S CONCERNS

Xinjiang Region

Like Islamabad, Beijing was also deeply concerned about its Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and western border in the wake of Moscow's aggression. In this context, two factors were greatly detrimental for the Chinese worry; first was the geographical proximity of the Xinjiang region with the USSR and Afghan border and second was the restive separatist Muslim population. This closeness of the territory loomed large in the "geopolitics of China" (Bhola, 1986). Beijing was "apprehensive about the Soviet subversive activities in this region. Even before China regained control Soviet influence loomed large there. During the early 1960s serious differences arose between Russia and China over Sinkiang (Xinjiang)" (Bhola, 1986). Long before in 1930, Stalin was tempted to establish a protectorate in Xinjiang. The area's broadness was adding a new fear in the dilemma. Xinjiang has 5,500 kilometer long "international borders and occupies a sixth of China's landmass". Its geostrategic position increased in the way that it had touched different cultural regions; Central Asian Republics of the Soviet Union, Mongolia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet and China proper" (Becquelin, 2000).

In a competitive hostile environment, a crisis changes and shapes the policies of nation states. A crisis tends to highlight the importance of various factors which have a stake in international relations. Power configurations, power parity, values, risks, perceptions and decision making are central to international politics. During the presence of Red Army in Kabul, the values' importance in the form of same ideology between Moscow and Beijing did not work. During this process, the Chinese policy towards Soviet had "increasingly become less ideological in nature and more pragmatic and instrumental" (Mei, 1985). Here was the clash between their national interests. The power parity hanged over the security of Chinese land, because the Soviet Union had installed 480,000 troops on the borders with China. It was supplemented by 125 SS-20 missiles and 60 Backfire bombers which had both regional and global strategic significance and consequences. China was demanding for the Soviet troops' reduction and removal of the missiles and bombers. The demand was the reduction of Red Army "to the 1965 level, including the removal of all forces from the Mongolian People's Republic". China's leadership declared the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as a hegemonic action (Whiting, 1984).

The Beijing regime had always liked to see Afghanistan as a neutral or non-aligned country free of any great power's influence. This wish was threatened by the Soviet plan to occupy the Wakhan corridor (Subramanian, 1989) while present in Kabul. If Wakhan had to occupy by the Soviets, the security of the Xinjiang would be at stake. China sent her military forces and intelligence personnel near to the Wakhan valley. Commenting on this situation, V. D. Chopra has said that although the Sino-Afghan common border was short and did not extend for more than seventy kilometers, but the Chinese armed troops and secret services were present there in such a number that it seemed like every kilometer of the border had turned into a mini cantonment (Chopra, 1985).

Although China had conflicts with the Soviet Union on many occasions and at various locations, the Xinjiang case was a long-disputed. This issue was in the Pamir Mountains in the Wakhan corridor, just north of Afghanistan. The nature of this dispute was crucial because it impinged on the ease with which major sources of tension between the two countries might be eliminated. Moreover, the resolution of the issue had "important geopolitical implications for the neighboring countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Garver, 1981). If it had important geopolitical implications for Afghanistan and Pakistan, surely, it

had the opposite impacts on Xinjiang region. Just as were the disturbances in Afghanistan, the region was vulnerable to the Soviet military action. The region's geographical proximity with India was another concern for Beijing. In the presence of an Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace; India could start anarchy with the help of Soviet in the region.

Encirclement

The superpowers had implemented the encirclement or containment policies during the Cold War era on different occasions. The security pacts and alliances of the United States were for the purpose to contain the spread of communism. Like the US; the USSR too carried on encirclement plans to contain the growth of influence of America on the one hand and block the Chinese way on the other. The well-known competition among these three states in the shape of a triangle in the Southeast and Northeast Asia was on the same line. Being experienced with the tactics, the Beijing Regime was well-aware about the strategies of the Soviet Union encirclement of China in the region. "In the late 1970s, the increased Soviet military buildup in East Asia and Soviet treaties with Vietnam and Afghanistan heightened China's awareness of the threat of Soviet encirclement".* In fact, both regions were volatile; the Wakhan Salient was attached with war-led Afghanistan, another part of Xinjiang with the expansionist Soviet and on another front was the hostile Vietnam, with which China had a border war.

To eliminate the encirclement and normalize the relations, China had emphasized on the removal of the following three obstacles. The USSR's military troops build up along the Sino-Soviet border, the presence of Red Army in Afghanistan and the continued support of Moscow to Hanoi against the Phnom Penh (Mei, 1981). The Soviet presence and expansion to the air fields and naval bases of Vietnam was a cause of anxiety for Chinese Communists. This strategy repeated by the Soviet military in Afghanistan where they had full control on air bases of Kabul and was further striving for maritime command in Indian Ocean. The Soviet was trying to make an excuse for its aggression that being a neighbor it was her moral responsibility to protect Afghanistan against the interference of any power. Geopolitically, the strategists in Kremlin were greatly worried about the growing Chinese influence and making allies in different regions of Asia. Minton. F. Goldman has explained this point by saying that the USSR "may have decided to go into Afghanistan not only to protect the Kabul government against foreign interference. They may also have wanted to secure their control over Afghanistan as a means of countering the expansion of Chinese influence in the region and elsewhere in Asia" (Goldman, 1984).

China was not only in parallel position with the Soviet in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and Africa but also was in race for influence in Middle East and Indian Ocean. Some states in the Arab rim-land were already pro-Soviet. Among other objectives, the southward drive of the Soviets was greatly motivated by the influence politics. The Soviet aim of Beijing encirclement would materialize by making a "chain of pro-Soviet countries surrounding China" (Hilali, 2005). The Indian factor was not out of consideration as she had not opposed the Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. In the presence of cordial relations between Moscow and New Delhi, especially in the framework of their Friendship Treaty, the Soviet Union could use India as a springboard for encirclement of the PRC. It could testify the realist tradition, "my enemy's enemy is my friend" when both of them were hobnobbing with each other and were China's strong adversaries.

* Sino-Soviet Relations, Country Studies. <http://www.country-studies.com/china/sino-soviet-relations.html>

CONCLUSION

The USSR's invasion of Afghanistan had a direct impact on the policy of Pakistan (Ali, 1983) by which then more vigorously struggled for her national security. The Soviet attack added a new dilemma in already persistent hostile atmosphere surrounding Pakistan. The period was crucial in the sense that beside the external changes in political system, the domestic political situation of Pakistan was also in turmoil. The occupation brought a sinister storm of war-clouds which was threatening the regional stability especially after the creation of Bangladesh. The Pakistani Government and people were worried about the ongoing developments in Afghanistan and the consequences of war.

If there was not a direct threat to the security of China, likely, the Soviet invasion posed a danger to its sovereignty. The security dilemma created by the Soviet, in the Chinese view, had far-reaching consequences, for countries' bilateral relations, regional stability and world peace. The Chinese knew the Soviet involvement in Southeast Asia long before the new 'power game' in Southwest Asia. The mutual suspensions further increased as a result of the Red Army's climb over a neutral and backward country.

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