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## Sectarianism, Geopolitics, and the Legacy of Mujahideen: Pakistan's Role in the Soviet–Afghan War

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**Abstract:** *The study explores the significant consequences of sectarianism for Pakistan's domestic security, linking its origin to Zia's Islamization drive and U.S. strategic partnerships during the Soviet–Afghan War. Zia's government, supported by substantial foreign assistance, gave more importance to importing consumer goods than to essential industries, leading to poor economic management and a rapidly growing national debt. In this context, Pakistan played a crucial role in the Afghan conflict, driven by its geopolitical ambitions. It sought to establish itself as a stronghold of Islam and suppress Afghan nationalism. The Mujahideen, who symbolized the Afghan resistance, received significant backing from Pakistan and international allies, resulting in a transformation in the war dynamics. The Mujahideen's tenacity, bolstered by external assistance and sophisticated armaments, finally led to the Soviet Union's retreat and the downfall of the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. This study highlights the long-lasting impact of Mujahideen's fight, which has shaped the geopolitical landscape of the region and played a role in the breakup of the Soviet Union.*

**Key Words:** Soviet–Afghan War, Mujahideen, Pakistan, Zia's Government, Nationalism

### Introduction

The presence of sectarianism in Pakistan is a significant obstacle that stands out as one of the country's most significant problems regarding its internal security. Zia's zealous drive for Islamization, along with the United States' strategic partnership with religion in order to combat the development of communism, resulted in the emergence of this unavoidable consequence. In the context of the conflict between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, the United States played a crucial part by investing significant resources in the establishment of religious organizations and the dissemination of Islamic literature, therefore incorporating religion into the military arsenal.

This setting was utilized to the fullest extent possible in order to strengthen religious institutions, particularly the expansion of madrassas when Zia was in power. An understanding of the exponential rise of religious influence within Pakistan's social fabric can be gained from the spread of these well-established religious entities.

In the end, the convergence of independent religious institutions and Zia's religious policies was the catalyst that sparked the development of a virulent infection that was characterized by fanaticism, intolerance, and sectarian violence across the nation. Punjab was the province hit the worst by the turbulence that occurred in Pakistan during the turbulent 1990s. Pakistan became fragmented along sectarian and regional lines. More than two hundred sectarian skirmishes resulted in the loss of almost two thousand lives and the injury of 561 persons. This outbreak of violence eventually spread to Karachi, the North West Frontier Province, and the northern regions of the country, where a total of 864 individual incidents resulted in the deaths of 529 people and injury to a large number of others. Sadly, bombings of mosques and imam bargains have become distressingly routine incidents, which further highlights the pervasive nature of sectarian violence that is consuming the nation's population.

It is unfortunate that extremist groups display an obvious lack of tolerance and use religion as a tool to draw a wedge between communities for the purpose of dividing them. By using firearms as a means of

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resolving their disagreements, they are able to increase existing tensions and plant the seeds of conflict among the general population.

Significant international economic assistance was provided to the Zia dictatorship during the time that it was experiencing severe financial pressures as a result of the Afghan War. Nevertheless, the government chose to direct these resources toward the importation of consumer items rather than directing them toward essential sectors such as the development of rural areas, education, and healthcare. The gross national savings of Pakistan dropped to an average of 4.6 per cent of the country's gross domestic product between the years 1973 and 1980, indicating that the country's economic management was severely flawed during that time period. To add insult to injury, only 17.5% of the gross national income was being put back into the economic infrastructure of the country.

By the time the Zia era came to an end, Pakistan was saddled with a massive long-term debt that exceeded sixteen billion dollars. This was due to the fact that capital inflows were unable to bridge the mounting deficit. Over half of the nation's gross domestic product was comprised of this debt, which was publicly guaranteed. Furthermore, it was a substantial 2.5 times bigger than all exports. In the year 1987, there was an increase of \$2.3 billion in short-term debt, which led to the development of short-term loans as a crutch financially. The value of exports of goods and services, on the other hand, was having trouble keeping up with the pace of the economy and accounted for slightly more than one-sixth of the burden of debt repayment. While this was going on, the average annual interest rate on loans that were still outstanding nearly doubled, going from 2.3 per cent to 5.8 per cent simultaneously.

When it came to the advancement of society, the Zia administration's priorities were all over the place. The allocation of funds for essential areas such as education and healthcare decreased from 2.1 per cent of the gross national product to a meagre 1.5 per cent of the GDP between the years 1982 and 1988. This is a significant decrease in spending. During the month of June 1988, the government allocated an astounding 48.31 billion rupees for defence expenditures. This figure was far more than the 47.14 billion rupees that was allocated for other critical development initiatives. This budgetary imbalance not only hampered the socioeconomic development of the nation but also accentuated the discrepancies that already existed, which in turn fueled dissatisfaction among the general population.

As a result of the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Pakistan's participation in the conflict between the superpowers became less significant, and the country's financial resources for future expansion were to significantly drop.

## Problem Statement

This study focuses on the complex difficulties that arise from sectarianism, geopolitical manoeuvring, and the historical impact of the Mujahideen in relation to Pakistan's participation in the Soviet-Afghan War. The objective is to comprehend the sources and consequences of sectarian tensions in Pakistan, which were intensified by Zia's policies of Islamization and the strategic alliances with the United States during the struggle. Moreover, it analyzes the economic consequences of giving greater importance to geopolitical goals than to crucial industries, resulting in poor economic administration and a rapidly increasing national debt. In addition, the book examines the consequences of Pakistan's backing of the Mujahideen, emphasizing their endurance and the wider geopolitical implications of their participation in the battle. This research seeks to provide a thorough examination of the intricate relationship between sectarianism, geopolitics, and militant movements. Its objective is to offer valuable insights that can contribute to the promotion of stability and security in the region.

## Research Question

- The influence of sectarianism, fueled by Zia's Islamization efforts and external allies during the Soviet-Afghan War, on Pakistan's internal security and geopolitical ambitions will be examined.
- Moreover, what were the economic consequences of giving more importance to geopolitical goals instead of key sectors, resulting in economic mismanagement and a substantial national debt?
- Finally, what was the role and influence of Pakistan's backing of the Mujahideen in the fight, and how did it change regional geopolitics and wider world dynamics?

## Hypothesis

Zia's implementation of Islamization programs, along with forming allies during the Soviet-Afghan War, is believed to have worsened sectarian tensions in Pakistan. This, in turn, weakened internal security and encouraged geopolitical aspirations. Moreover, it is argued that the emphasis on geopolitical goals at the expense of crucial sectors resulted in poor economic management and a significant accumulation of national debt. Furthermore, it is postulated that Pakistan's backing of the Mujahideen in the fight had a crucial impact on reconfiguring regional geopolitics and exerting influence on wider global dynamics.

## Methodology

This study uses qualitative analysis to thoroughly investigate the intricate interplay of sectarianism, geopolitics, and the historical impact of Mujahideen on Pakistan's role in the Soviet-Afghan War.

Qualitative methods encompass a thorough examination of literature, historical documents, government reports, academic publications, and media sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political context. This includes analyzing the causes and consequences of sectarian tensions, Zia's policies of Islamization, and Pakistan's strategic alliances during the conflict.

Furthermore, interviews were conducted with important stakeholders, officials, specialists, and individuals who have been impacted by sectarian violence. These interviews provided us with firsthand insights and viewpoints on the subject matter.

This study seeks to provide a thorough and detailed examination of the complex relationship between sectarianism, geopolitics, and militant movements in the context of Pakistan's involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War.

## Mujahideen's Role in Anti-Soviet Jihad

During the tumultuous War between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, which lasted from 1980 to 1989, the Afghan resistance fighters, who were known as Mujahideen, fought a tough battle against the Soviet-backed Kabul government and Soviet forces. In their fight against the Soviet Union, these Mujahideen exemplified unflinching loyalty by forming a coalition of volunteers from a variety of Muslim governments across North Africa and the Gulf. These Mujahideen also included Shiite and Sunni factions. Continued with tenacity and conviction, they persisted in their resistance until the Soviet soldiers were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in the year 1989.

Along with assistance from the United States of America, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, and other Sunni Muslim nations, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence played a crucial part in the training of these Mujahideen. The conflict, which was unwittingly sparked by the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, and subsequent interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan in favour of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was responsible for galvanizing a diverse Islamist opposition into a cohesive grassroots resistance movement.

A widespread insurgency was created as a result of the invasion, which transcended familial, tribal, ethnic, and geographical lines. Afghans from all walks of life came together to protest the foreign involvement. The insurgency gained a significant ideological grounding when mullahs declared jihad against the Soviet intruders. This allowed the insurgency to combine Islamic precepts with the zeal for national liberation. This combination of tribal affiliations with Islamist ideology highlighted a powerful connection between Islam and nationalism, which in turn imbued the struggle with a profound philosophical component.

When the struggle between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan first broke out, the Mujahideen were already divided along regional, ethnic, tribal, and sectarian lines. This was a reflection of the complex social fabric that existed in Afghanistan at the time. However, as the conflict continued, a sense of solidarity began to emerge. This spirit was forged in the furnace of shared suffering and a single objective of warding off foreign occupation. The Afghan people's determination and tenacity in their pursuit of freedom and sovereignty were demonstrated by the shift from fragmentation to cohesion that they underwent.



The power and grandeur of Mujahideen commanders were significantly influenced by a number of criteria, including their social rank, educational background, leadership abilities, and fervent commitment to Islam. As a result of the concentration of seven prominent Sunni Mujahideen factions in the strategically important city of Peshawar, Pakistan emerged as a central participant in the political and military environment. Among these forces were the Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan, Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan, Jamiat-e-Islami, Hizb-e-Islami, Harakat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami, Mahaz Najat e Mali Afghanistan, and Jabehi Najat Mali Afghanistan. Eight Shiite Mujahideen organizations existed alongside these Sunni factions. These organizations included the Revolutionary Guards, Harakat-e-Islami, Shore, Nasser, and Hezbollah, among others. Each of these organizations had their own unique aims and connections.

The Sunni Mujahideen factions came together in March 1980 to form the Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan. Their goal was to gain international recognition and support for their cause. In the beginning, when the Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, they used conventional armoured tactics. However, they were confronted with the traditional tribal charges of the Mujahideen. On the other hand, early confrontations in 1980 and 1981 were favourable to the Soviets since the Mujahideen lacked organization, training, and military resources. This was reinforced by the overwhelming power of the Soviet military machine.

When confronted with the fierce resistance of the Mujahideen, the Soviets altered their tactics, concentrating on capturing strategic towns and supply routes while leaving the countryside comparatively untouched. Because of this adjustment in strategy, the Mujahideen were able to operate freely in rural areas, carrying out guerilla raids and ambushes without fear of repercussions whatsoever. In reaction to the Soviet scorched-earth operations that were intended to depopulate the countryside, the Mujahideen increased the intensity of their sabotage campaigns, which targeted government infrastructure as well as military installations.

It was in 1983 when significant foreign players, including China, Saudi Arabia, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom, started providing the Mujahideen with superior weaponry and resources through Pakistan. This was the turning moment. In order to effectively resist the Soviet Union's air superiority, the Mujahideen were equipped with advanced munitions such as ground-to-air rockets, most notably the British Blowpipe and the American Stinger. This enabled them to effectively combat the fearsome Mi-24 Hind assault helicopters.

By 1985, the Sunni Mujahideen factions had unified their efforts under the Seven-Party Mujahideen Alliance, which allowed them to accelerate their military operations against the Soviet army and their Afghan allies. The Mujahideen took advantage of the opportunity presented by the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers from Afghanistan in 1989, which was led by Mikhail Gorbachev. This allowed them to launch a coordinated onslaught against Kabul, which ultimately led to the collapse of the government that was supported by the Soviet Union. It is a widely held belief among historians that the unrelenting resistance of Mujahideen was a crucial factor in the acceleration of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This assertion highlights the Mujahideen's ongoing influence on the geopolitical landscape of the world.

## Pakistan's Objectives

Throughout the duration of the Afghan War, the government of Pakistan navigated a complicated web of aims, frequently finding itself at odds with its own ambitions. This was driven by both geostrategic imperatives and domestic concerns. The steadfast support for the Afghan resistance movement and the provision of sanctuary for refugees who were fleeing their homes were the two most important of these goals. At times, however, the pursuit of these aims came into conflict with one another, which resulted in Islamabad experiencing unforeseen difficulties and frustrations.

The objective of securing the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan was at the core of Pakistan's military strategy when it originally came into being. This was due to the fact that Pakistan was concerned about the possibility of being surrounded by forces from India and Afghanistan on one flank and troops from Afghanistan and the Soviet Union on the other flank. The government of Pakistan continued to be concerned about the possibility of Soviet interference in its tribal regions and the Frontier province, which



would provide financial support to ethnic separatist movements. This was despite the fact that the possibility of a communist invasion of Pakistan appeared distant. Because of this, it was determined that the use of intimidation strategies was ineffectual, which meant that a strategic focus should be placed on diplomatic manoeuvres and backing for the Afghan resistance.

The massive challenge of resettling Afghan refugees within Pakistan's borders was something that Pakistan was struggling with at the same time. During the time that the international community was working together to support a large relief effort, Islamabad took on a significant portion of the responsibility by providing hospitality to the Afghans who had been displaced until the situation in their homeland became more stable. On the other hand, Pakistan's resources and infrastructure were brought under strain as a result of the extended presence of refugees, which highlighted the country's reliance on ongoing help from the international community.

Furthermore, the inflow of Afghan migrants caused social and economic upheavals within Pakistan, which not only exacerbated existing tensions but also fueled hatred among the local population. It was frequently believed that the inflow of refugees was to blame for the collapse of law and order in certain regions, which tarnished the opinions of both the Afghan population and the government of Pakistan.

When President Zia's government implemented martial law, the Afghan War served as a handy pretext to justify its continuation. This allowed the government to leverage foreign backing in order to strengthen its hold on power. A great number of commentators questioned whether Zia's dictatorship would have been able to survive for as long if it had not received the support from outside sources that it had obtained by its participation in the battle, particularly from the United States. Pakistan got enormous financial and diplomatic help from the United States, amounting to over \$7.2 billion in total assistance throughout Zia's tenure. This further entrenched Islamabad's involvement in the regional dynamics of the Afghan War. In exchange for Pakistan's support for the Afghan resistance, Pakistan received this assistance.

Zia's primary goal during the war was to elevate Pakistan's status as a frontline state by projecting it as the spearhead of Islam against communism supported by the Soviet Union. This was accomplished through a multilayered strategy. In spite of this, there was a more assertive goal hiding beneath this shell of defensive posturing. There are signs that show Zia's desire to extend Pakistan's influence beyond the Afghan theatre and into the Soviet Central Asian areas that are located over the Oxus River.

In addition, politicians in Islamabad were intensely intent on bringing the tide of Afghan nationalism under control while simultaneously establishing the Durand Line as an unchangeable international border. After the war, Pakistan made an effort to cultivate a cooperative relationship with Afghanistan in order to ensure that it would have a friendly neighbour along its northwest borders. This was done in an effort to avoid any potential consequences that could arise as a result of this border dispute. In the event that Pakistan and India were to engage in future conflicts, such a relationship would not only provide Pakistan with strategic geopolitical depth, but it would also be contingent on Iran's cooperation in the dynamics of the area.

In light of the fact that the Afghan conflict is of the utmost significance to Pakistan's national security interests, the military has taken on a major role in the process of developing and carrying out the country's strategic objectives. In light of this, Pakistan's intelligence agencies, and the ISI in particular, were given a substantial portion of the tasks that were assigned to them because of their ability to operate covertly and their skill in the field of operations. Despite the fact that the decision to entrust the ISI with the formulation of Afghan policy may have come as a surprise, it served to highlight the agency's central role in establishing Pakistan's regional agenda and protecting Pakistan's strategic interests in the dangerous Afghan theatre.

### **Pakistan's Participation in the War**

Pakistan became actively involved in the conflict when it allowed individuals who opposed the Kabul administration to migrate to its nation and openly accepted a significant number of refugees when the Communists achieved power in April 1978. This allowed Pakistan to get directly involved in the conflict. With few particular factors other than the fact that it was responsible for launching the conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan has declared its intention to play a representative role in the character of



peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan. Officials from Pakistan were primarily responsible for overseeing the Afghan presence in Pakistan. These officials also made efforts to exert some influence on the direction the war would go. There was nothing but the knowledge and approval of the authorities, and it was anticipated that the acts of local Afghans would be consistent with Pakistan's imagined objectives. Both of these things were true. Additionally, the mission required the creation and coordination of Afghan rebel organizations located in Peshawar, as well as the cautious monitoring of refugees.

In addition, the ISI was involved in the gathering of intelligence and the manipulation of political figures in Afghanistan. In light of the fact that the ISI maintained control over the distribution of armaments, Pakistan exerted the greatest direct effect on the outcome of the conflict. At any point during the conflict, Islamabad firmly refused to accept that it had armed or trained the resistance, nor did it acknowledge that it had enabled other nations or groups to do something similar. In one aspect, the government of Pakistan may be considered accurate. Because it did not provide the jihadists with any equipment, it made it possible for the party to acquire weapons of war from other countries. Following their arrival in Pakistan by ship and aeroplane, weapons were transferred to the border regions of the country by armed trucks that were under the control of the military authority. At the border, while they were entering Afghanistan, guns were discovered and seized. Pakistan, on the other hand, has shown a degree of moderation in its support of the resistance during the early phases of the conflict while simultaneously taking acclaim from the international community for its stance and obtaining assistance from other countries to protect its border.

For as long as they could, the men and mules who were transporting the weapons made every effort to cross the border into Afghanistan as quickly as they could. Pakistan was mentioned as having few assets in the middle, and the country's number of two planes per week is still not limited. This was according to the information that was provided. The local distribution hubs in Pakistan that were run by private companies were the sources from which the mujahidin obtained their weapons. In accordance with the program, the Pakistani military asserted ownership over a portion of the supplies.

Additionally, with the assistance of Afghan resistance organizations, weapons for the Mujahideen were able to penetrate the majority of the marketplaces. The establishment of Pakistani depots, some of which were located within Pakistani military facilities, occurred concurrently with the provision of arms support. It was not always the case that the ISI provided the mujahidin with the heavier armament that they were looking for, nor did they always provide them with the kind of intelligence support and logistical aid that they so desperately needed. According to Pakistani officials, an increase in the number of mujahidin who are prepared to fight would lead to a major increase in the number of alternative refugees in Pakistan, which has been increasing on multiple occasions in the country. In addition to the knowledge that Islamabad was involved in the arms trade, independent operators felt that Soviet tanks and planes were a further defence of the Mujahideen. This knowledge pushed Moscow to oppose and countermeasure Islamabad's actions. In addition to the risk that highly sophisticated Soviet weapons would find their way to nationalist rebels in a Pakistan that is ethnically split, the officials of Pakistan predicted that airstrikes would be carried out against mujahidin staging camps, as well as the risk that highly sophisticated weapons from the Soviet Union may end up in the hands of nationalist insurgents in Pakistan, which is currently divided along ethnic lines.

Furthermore, the training and movement of fighters, in addition to the extraordinary mobility of the party's resistance forces, were not able to generate any substantial force through the government authorities of border issues.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the study emphasizes the complex relationship between sectarianism, geopolitics, and the lasting impact of the Mujahideen on Pakistan's involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War. Zia's Islamization initiatives and U.S. strategic partnerships during the conflict caused sectarian divisions to arise in Pakistan, making internal security difficulties worse. Pakistan's terrain has been further complicated due to the economic mismanagement and huge national debt resulting from the prioritizing of geopolitical goals over economic progress.

The Mujahideen, who symbolized the Afghan resistance, got significant assistance from Pakistan and its international backers, which fundamentally altered the parameters of the fight. Their tenacity, bolstered by external assistance and sophisticated armaments, ultimately led to the retreat of Soviet forces and the downfall of the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

After the conflict ended, Pakistan faced the consequences of sectarian bloodshed, economic pressure, and geopolitical implications. However, the enduring legacy of the Mujahideen continues to have a significant impact on regional geopolitics and broader global dynamics. It is crucial to comprehend and deal with the intricate relationship between sectarianism, geopolitics, and militant groups in order to promote stability and security in the region.

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