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# PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY A Reappraisal

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## Introduction

The first fifty years of Pakistan's existence have been unusually eventful, marked by many ups and downs for the country. Foreign policy has played a pivotal role, for better or for worse, in several of these developments. The purpose of this study is to analyse, as dispassionately as possible, the successes and failures of the foreign policy pursued so far by Pakistan. The intention here is not to give a comprehensive narrative of Pakistan's foreign policy over the past fifty years, as that exercise has been carried out elsewhere by several other writers. Instead, this study is basically an argument, albeit a long one, about the merits and demerits of the policies followed by Pakistan so far. The author, who spent nearly thirty-nine years in Pakistan's diplomatic service, witnessed from a relatively close range some of the historical developments, which form the subject matter of this book. However, by and large, personal reminiscences have been avoided.

The policy-makers in any country, no doubt, often have a hard time choosing between the various options before them. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to predict what will be the end result of the policy chosen. Yet, choices have to be made and decisions taken. Obviously, there is a tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of policy-makers who have to handle national matters anywhere. In particular, those entrusted with taking difficult foreign policy decisions, affecting not only the present but also the future generations, have a truly onerous task. The benefit of hindsight is a luxury available to historians because they know the final outcome of a given policy decision. Moreover, with the passage of time, it is much easier to conduct an impassive scrutiny of the merits and demerits of policies followed. However, those in authority who take the original decisions, can only guess the consequences of their actions and

decisions. Nevertheless, this cannot be used as a general excuse for governments and policy-makers to defend the failures of their foreign policy. Most governments usually have a mass of information available to them. They have trained professionals and experts at their service. Above all, great leaders are blessed with an historic vision, the sagacity, and even the instinctive ability, to take the right decisions.

Foreign policy is often considered the first line of defence of any country. This is probably even more pronounced in the case of Pakistan, which has been beset by a difficult security situation from the very beginning. Indeed, the country can be said to have had a baptism of fire. It was more or less thrown into the vortex of international cross-currents before it could even stand on its feet. Pakistan inherited a complex antagonistic relationship with India, a neighbour who was several times its size. Moreover, Pakistan's odd and almost indefensible frontiers consisting, initially, of two separated wings across a thousand miles of hostile territory, added to the intricacies of its security problems.

It is generally agreed that foreign policy is influenced by a country's history and geography. This has certainly been the case in Pakistan. The Islamic identity and consciousness of its people have been dominant influences on their history throughout. Indeed, without that particular background, there could have been no Pakistan. It was the distinctive Islamic identity and peculiar historical experiences of the Muslims living in the South Asian subcontinent which provided the motivation for seeking a separate and independent Muslim homeland that finally came into being on 14 August 1947. Moreover, this historical legacy has profoundly affected the security concerns and foreign policy pursued by Pakistan.

While most states in the world have existed for a long time within defined geo-political limits, Pakistan's borders were carved out for the first time in 1947. In this case, ideology had clearly preceded the delineation of borders. Pakistan emerged as a state because of the Islamic consciousness of its people which had evolved over several centuries, nourished by the ideas

of a number of rulers, religious leaders, scholars, thinkers and poets. In this long list, the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was a more recent but, perhaps, the most influential exponent. Moreover, he is regarded the first top-ranking figure to set forth the concept of an independent Muslim state comprising the Muslim-majority areas in the north-west of what was then British India. Thus, he is also known as the 'thinker' of Pakistan. Pakistan is probably the first state in the world carved out in the name of Islam. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Pakistani people have always shown a deep commitment to Islam, not only in the religious sense but also in their political and global outlook. Moreover, it is this peculiar background which has profoundly influenced the formulation of the country's foreign policy after independence. Any attempt to understand the various policies followed by Pakistan would be incomplete, if not impossible, without keeping this Islamic dimension in mind.

Apart from history and ideology, Pakistan's geographical location has also profoundly affected its fortunes as an independent state. Had Pakistan been located in some other part of the world, its course of action and policies after gaining independence might have been entirely different. However, as the saying goes, one can choose one's friends but not one's neighbours. It so happened that Pakistan, a relatively big country itself, is located right next door to India, which is much larger, and with whom Pakistan has always had a relationship of distrust and antagonism. Thus, Pakistan has been preoccupied, for the greater part of its existence, in a difficult and unequal contest with India. This has produced the most decisive impact on the formulation of Pakistan's foreign policy.

However, in addition to the Indian dimension, the geo-strategic location of Pakistan has had important repercussions on its foreign policy. To begin with, Pakistan consisted of two wings and was both a neighbour of Central Asia as well as Southeast Asia. The post-1971 Pakistan has borders with India, Iran, Afghanistan, and China. Moreover, until 1991, only a narrow 40-kilometre stretch of land separated it from a super power, the former Soviet Union. Pakistan has thus been

surrounded by three big neighbours: India, China, and the Soviet Union, the latter two being Communist powers. Out of these, China has been a friend whereas India has been the adversary. The Soviet Union, for the greater part, had been close to India. It is also notable that though Pakistan is situated in South Asia, it is adjacent to Central Asia and Middle East and is located at the mouth of the strategic Persian Gulf region. While it is a South Asian country, on the basis of its physical location, Pakistan is in some ways also an extension of the Middle East and Central Asia from where it draws most of its spiritual roots and some of its ethnic and cultural origins. The best natural access to the sea for several land-locked countries in Central Asia is via Afghanistan and Pakistan. Western China, which has common borders with Pakistan, also has an outlet to the sea via Pakistan.

In terms of size, Pakistan is among the ten most populous countries in the world. In the Islamic world, which consists of over fifty independent states, Pakistan is second only to Indonesia in population. Moreover, among the Third World countries as also in the Islamic world, Pakistan ranks high in military capability, industrial and agricultural progress, scientific and intellectual development, as also in culture and, in some respects, in education. Pakistan has served as a think-tank and laboratory of the Islamic world in political and economic matters. Its thinkers like Iqbal and Maudoodi have influenced Muslims in many parts of the world. All of these factors, which account for Pakistan's importance and notable geo-strategic significance, have also influenced its foreign policy in one way or the other.

The fiftieth year of Pakistan's independence is perhaps a fitting milestone for taking stock of the successes and failures of its foreign policy so far. However, in a country where emotions run deep and strong partisanship often clouds judgement, any effort to make an objective evaluation can be a hazardous exercise. This seems unfortunate, since the formulation of foreign policy of any country should really be an exercise conducted with cool precision and clear thinking. A

country's self-preservation and well-being over-rides all other factors. National self-interest has to be given priority in the making of a country's foreign policy. Governments come and go but a country's interests have permanence. Moreover, historical records show that there are few permanent friends or permanent enemies in global politics. The foreign policy of most states has been mainly motivated by self-interest and not by personal factors. The record also shows that ideology has, in general, played a minor role in the formulation of foreign policy.

A successful foreign policy-maker seeks to promote a country's strategic interests by devising policies based on brutal realism, bereft of all kinds of illusions, romanticism, and emotions. In diplomatic parlance, this approach has been described as '*realpolitik*.' On the other hand, foreign policy failures have been generally attributable to a lack of realism or, what is even worse, self-delusion. A study of the first fifty years of Pakistan's foreign policy, unfortunately, bears out this truth in a number of important instances. On several crucial occasions, Pakistan's policy-makers and, indeed, even the nation as a whole, have allowed illusions to get the better of their judgement, resulting in disastrous consequences for the country. This has been a major flaw in the formulation of Pakistan's foreign policy and, unless the policy-makers draw the right lessons from historical experience, such unrealistic evaluations are capable of causing further harm to the country.

The other main weakness in the formulation of Pakistan's foreign policy has been '*ad hocism*' or the tendency to take decisions to tide over an immediate exigency without any long-term planning. There have been several instances where there was a lack of foresight in the country's considered response to given developments. Pakistan has thus more often reacted than acted according to a definite plan.

Such *ad hocism* has been, in part, due to the absence of an effective and relatively autonomous Policy Planning and Research Division in the Pakistan Foreign Office and the lack of involvement of think tanks, top scholars, and academic experts in policy planning. While a Research Wing has long been in

existence in the Foreign Office, it has rarely been manned by the best brains in the Foreign Service. Usually, it has been a dumping ground for officers for whom no other posting could be found. They, in turn, have tended to consider their posting in the Research Wing of little importance and have thus generally worked without any commitment. Not surprisingly, they have, in a kind of vicious cycle, received little encouragement or appreciation. Also, in the actual functioning of the Foreign Office, the Research Wing has been rarely consulted by the political desks while formulating policies. The Research Wing has, moreover, been unable to have systematic access to important current information with the result that it has often been starved of vital input needed for any kind of meaningful contribution.

In general, the political desks in the Pakistan Foreign Office have played a more decisive role in the formulation of foreign policy. However, here too, matters have not been helped, in many instances, by the posting of officers who have had little previous experience or specialization regarding the given geographical area. Many of them indeed get to learn the more precise nature of the issues affecting their area of responsibility on the job. Hence, they have lacked real insight into political under-currents in the countries under their charge. Moreover, there never seems to be time for anyone in the Foreign Office or in Pakistan Embassies abroad to go through old records to get the full historical perspective of relations with a given country. All of this has accounted for *ad hocism* in the formulation of Pakistan's foreign policy.

Finally, *ad hoc* policies have resulted from the continuous practice of the head of government to give directives on a given issue without any kind of advance consultation with the Foreign Office. As the culture of opportunism has grown in Pakistan over the years, the Foreign Office has, for its part, rarely shown the backbone to suggest any kind of reconsideration of such political directives. More often than not the Foreign Office merely accompanies the many sycophants surrounding the top leadership in applauding every brain-child of the chief executive. The result, of course, has been that policy decisions have been