



Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan During Benazir Bhutto First Era (1988–1990): A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This Article provides a critical assessment of Pakistan's Afghan policy during Bhutto's first rule (1988–1990), examining the continuities from Zia's era, the limitations faced by the civilian government, and the broader regional and international dynamics that influenced bilateral relations. During Benazir Bhutto's first tenure (1988–1990), Pakistan-Afghan relations were shaped by the lingering aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal and the rise of the Mujahideen factions. Diplomatically, Bhutto's government engaged in UN-mediated talks aimed at a political settlement, while covertly maintaining contacts with various warlords to protect border security. Overall, the era was marked by a pragmatic yet uneasy partnership driven by mutual security interests amid regional turbulence.

Keywords: *Pakistan, Afghanistan, Relations, Benazir-Bhutto, Era, 1988–1990, Policy*

Introduction

The years from 1988 to 1990 represented a pivotal transitional stage in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations. The death of President of Pakistan- General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in August 1988 and the subsequent elections of Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister introduced a new political phase in Islamabad. After more than a decade of military rule, Pakistan returned to a democratic setup for the first time since 1977. However, Bhutto's government inherited a deeply complex Afghan policy shaped by years of military dominance, Cold War rivalries, and Pakistan's active involvement in supporting the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupation.¹

Although Bhutto symbolized a democratic break from military rule, her authority over Afghan policy remained limited. The powerful military and intelligence institutions, which had shaped and executed Afghanistan's strategy throughout the 1980s, continued to hold conclusive sway. This tug-of-war between civilian and military leadership often resulted in

¹ Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *Pakistan: The State of the Union* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1997), 88–90.

ambiguities and inconsistencies in Islamabad's approach toward Kabul.²

During her first term, three major themes shaped Pakistan–Afghanistan relations: the regional consequences of the Soviet withdrawal, the struggle among Mujahideen factions for political control, and Pakistan's efforts to preserve its influence in Afghanistan while maintaining relations with global and regional actors. The inability of Afghan factions to agree on a unified government prolonged instability, while Pakistan's selective support for specific groups intensified internal divisions within Afghanistan.³

Pakistan's Political Transition after General Zia's Death

The death of General Zia-ul-Haq in a plane crash on 17 August 1988 created a political vacuum in Pakistan. For over a decade, Zia had ruled under martial law, centralizing power in the hands of the military, particularly in matters of domestic governance and foreign policy concerning Afghanistan. His death ended an era of authoritarianism and reopened the path to parliamentary democracy.

Following Zia's death, constitutional procedures were revived under Acting President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who later assumed the presidency, while General Mirza Aslam Beg became Chief of Army Staff. Despite the restoration of democratic rule, the military retained strong influence over critical issues, especially national security and Afghan affairs.⁴

The general elections-1988 were historic. Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) became the Prime Minister- the first woman to lead a Muslim-majority nation. Her government symbolized a democratic revival but faced fragile political conditions marked by civil–military tensions, ideological polarization, and economic difficulties.⁵

In Afghan affairs, Bhutto confronted immediate challenges. The Geneva Accord-1988 had already outlined the Soviet withdrawal, and Pakistan was tasked with managing its aftermath. Although she aimed to adopt a balanced foreign policy, Afghanistan remained under military control. The army viewed Afghanistan as a crucial buffer against India and resisted civilian interference in a policy they considered vital to national defense.⁶

Thus, Pakistan entered a dual power arrangement: Bhutto embodied democratic leadership, but the military retained decisive control over Afghan policy. This imbalance limited her capacity to implement independent strategies and defined the trajectory of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations during her first term.

Soviet Withdrawal and the Geneva Accord

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was the most defining event shaping Pakistan's Afghan policy under Bhutto. After nearly ten years of war, the Soviet Union, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, sought disengagement under its reformist agenda of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The Geneva Accords, signed in April 1988 by Afghanistan and Pakistan with the United States and Soviet Union as guarantors, formalized the withdrawal.

² Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), 230–232.

³ Hasan Askari Rizvi, *Military, State and Society in Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 146–148.

⁴ Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of the East: An Autobiography* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), 200–205.

⁵ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, *Pakistan's Defence Policy 1947–58* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 221–223.

⁶ Ahmad Faruqui, *Rethinking the National Security of Pakistan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 110–112.

The Accords mandated a phased Soviet exit, completed by February 1989. For Pakistan, this represented a diplomatic victory, seemingly validating its decade-long support for the Mujahideen. Yet, the settlement failed to address Afghanistan's political future. The Mujahideen, excluded from negotiations, rejected the Accords, denouncing them for legitimizing the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime. This flaw ensured that conflict would persist beyond the withdrawal.⁷

When Bhutto took office, the withdrawal was already underway, leaving her government to manage its consequences: a power vacuum, intensified factional conflict, and security uncertainties. Pakistan, through the Inter-Services Intelligence, continued providing arms, training, and logistical support to the Mujahideen. But the lack of unity among different Afghan factions- notably Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami, Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami, and Sayyaf's Ittehad-i-Islami hampered efforts for a stable transition.⁸

Bhutto's influence remained minimal, as the military sustained Zia's policy of backing specific factions to secure a pro-Pakistan Kabul and prevent the rise of regimes aligned with India or the Soviet Union. The civil war following the Soviet exit created new challenges: the influx of weapons, narcotics, and refugees aggravated Pakistan's internal instability.

Thus, the Soviet withdrawal exposed the paradox of Pakistan's democratic transition: while civilian rule was restored, Afghan policy remained dominated by unelected institutions.

Civil–Military Divide in Afghan Policy

A defining feature of Bhutto's first government was the civil–military divide over Afghan policy. Despite her popular mandate, her capacity to direct foreign and defense matters remained restricted. The military and Inter-Services Intelligence, accustomed to autonomy during Zia's rule, resisted ceding control.

Their approach centered on the “strategic depth” doctrine — securing a friendly regime in Kabul to safeguard Pakistan's western frontier. Consequently, the army continued backing Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami as the preferred ally. She (Bhutto) however, favored a more inclusive approach, seeking engagement with multiple Afghan leaders to reduce factionalism and foster a negotiated settlement.⁹

Tensions surfaced in 1989 when the Inter-Services Intelligence orchestrated the Mujahideen's offensive on Jalalabad to establish a government-in-exile. The operation failed, revealing divisions among the Mujahideen and flaws in Pakistan's strategy. Bhutto distanced herself from the operation, which underscored the risks of a military-led policy without civilian oversight.¹⁰

Efforts to institutionalize coordination, such as the Cabinet Committee on National Security, were largely symbolic. Real decision-making remained within the military. Intelligence

⁷ Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 423–425.

⁸ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 220–222.

⁹ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 172–175.

¹⁰ Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *War Without Winners: Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition After the Cold War* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105–107.

operations continued without transparent civilian review, leaving her marginalized in a policy area central to national security.¹¹

This imbalance demonstrated that while democracy had been restored, real power in foreign affairs remained with the armed forces. Afghan policy thus reflected continuity rather than reform, prolonging Pakistan's entanglement in Afghanistan's internal conflicts.

Relations with Different Factions of Afghan Mujahideen

Pakistan's dealings with Afghan Mujahideen factions during 1988–1990 were crucial to its regional strategy. Having armed and trained the resistance during the Soviet war, Islamabad now sought to translate those alliances into a stable post-war government.

It was continually prioritized Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami, viewing him as a loyal partner aligned with Pakistan's security goals. However, Hekmatyar's autocratic style and hostility toward other Mujahideen leaders hindered unity. Competing factions- Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami, Sayyaf's Ittehad-i-Islami, and Dostum's militia, each pursued independent ambitions.

She (Bhutto) advocated a more inclusive engagement, recognizing that without consensus, lasting peace was impossible. Yet her limited control over Inter-Services Intelligence operations prevented policy adjustments. The March 1989 Jalalabad offensive- led by Hekmatyar with Pakistani backing- failed disastrously, exposing disorganization and rivalries among Mujahideen groups.¹²

Pakistan also attempted to facilitate a coalition government-in-exile, but factional mistrust doomed these efforts. As a result, Islamabad's credibility as a neutral mediator declined, and Afghanistan descended deeper into civil war.¹³

Overall, Bhutto's tenure witnessed a continuation of Zia's approach- selective alliances, deep interference, and minimal civilian oversight- outcomes that later contributed to Afghanistan's prolonged instability and set the stage for the Taliban's rise.

Pakistan-United States'- Afghanistan Triangular Relations

The period following the Soviet exit reshaped the triangular relationship between Pakistan, the United States, and Afghanistan. Throughout the 1980s, Pakistan had served as Washington's frontline ally, channeling aid to the Mujahideen. However, once the Soviets withdrew, U.S. interest rapidly declined.

By 1989, Washington considered its mission accomplished and began disengaging, leaving Pakistan to manage the consequences alone. The U.S. offered little assistance for reconstruction or political reconciliation, forcing Islamabad to shoulder the burden of instability.¹⁴

¹¹ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 176–178.

¹² Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century*, 431–432.

¹³ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 180–182.

¹⁴ UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 134–137.

Simultaneously, Pakistan's nuclear program strained relations with the U.S. The Pressler Amendment required annual certification of non-nuclear status; by 1990, Washington refused certification, leading to aid suspension. This shift deprived Pakistan of critical support just as Afghan instability intensified.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Najibullah government, sustained by Soviet aid, proved unexpectedly resilient. Pakistan persisted with its Mujahideen strategy, anticipating his eventual fall. The U.S., however, showed little interest, reflecting diverging post-war priorities.

For Bhutto's government, this changing dynamic created a dilemma: Islamabad sought to maintain U.S. partnership while pursuing policies demanded by its military establishment. The result was isolation- Pakistan remained deeply involved in Afghanistan but without American backing, exposing its strategic vulnerabilities.¹⁶

Islamabad–Kabul Relations and the Afghan Refugee Issue

During 1988–1990, Islamabad's relations with Kabul were dominated by mistrust. Pakistan refused to recognize President Najibullah's Soviet-backed regime, branding it illegitimate, while Kabul accused Pakistan of sponsoring insurgency and destabilization. Diplomatic contacts remained minimal, and hostility persisted on both sides.¹⁷

Parallel to these tensions, Pakistan grappled with a massive refugee crisis. Since 1979, millions of Afghans had fled across the border, primarily to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. By the late 1980s, the refugee population reached nearly four million, placing immense strain on Pakistan's economy and infrastructure.¹⁸

Refugee camps became hubs of political and military activity, as Mujahideen factions used them for recruitment and logistics. This blurred humanitarian boundaries had worsened Islamabad–Kabul relations, with Najibullah alleging Pakistani interference.¹⁹

Inside Pakistan, refugees fueled demographic shifts, job competition, and the growth of informal markets linked to smuggling and arms trade. International aid softened some pressures, but the overall burden remained heavy. Benazir's civilian government had little capacity to implement long-term solutions under military-dominated policy constraints.

Thus, Islamabad–Kabul ties during this period remained adversarial, while the refugee question evolved into a lasting humanitarian and security challenge for Pakistan.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it is concluded that Ms. Bhutto's first term unfolded during a period of historic transformation in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. While her rise symbolized democratic restoration after years of military rule, the military establishment continued to dominate

¹⁵ S. Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan's Economy* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 260–262.

¹⁶ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Afghan Refugees and Pakistan," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 9 (1992): 813–815.

¹⁷ Rais, *War Without Winners*, 108–110

¹⁸ Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 34–36.

¹⁹ Faruqui, *Rethinking the National Security of Pakistan*, 115–117.

foreign and security affairs. Afghan policy remained largely unchanged from Zia's era, limiting civilian influence. The Soviet withdrawal under the Geneva Accord, though celebrated as a success, failed to secure Afghanistan's stability. Factional warfare among Mujahideen, fueled by Pakistan's selective patronage, deepened chaos. The failed Jalalabad offensive of 1989 epitomized the shortcomings of Islamabad's approach.

Meanwhile, U.S. disengagement and nuclear-related sanctions left Pakistan isolated as it faced escalating Afghan turmoil and refugee burdens. Relations with Kabul remained hostile, and domestic challenges from arms proliferation and displaced populations intensified. Pakistan–Afghanistan relations under Bhutto's first government were marked by continuity rather than change. Despite democratic revival, Afghan policy stayed under military control, prolonging instability and shaping the conflicts of the 1990s, including the eventual emergence of the Taliban.

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