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*Ronald Reagan meeting Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (center),  
December 7, 1982. Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential  
Library.*

## Paper

# Pakistani Proliferation or Power Politics? A Reexamination of Pakistan's Involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War

Peter Abernathy

IN PAKISTAN'S SEVENTY-YEAR HISTORY, FEW FIGURES HAVE BEEN AS polarizing as its sixth president, Muhammed Zia ul-Haq. Zia's improbably close personal friend, American Congressman Charles Wilson, said, "In history I have three heroes: Winston Churchill, President Lincoln, and President Zia ul-Haq."<sup>1</sup> Others were not so impressed. In his book, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, journalist Stephen Kinzer provided the following review of Zia's regime: "Pakistan's democratic order had been upset when General Zia al-Huq [*sic*] seized power in a military coup. Zia fervently dedicated himself to two goals: building a nuclear bomb and imposing what he called 'a genuine Islamic order' in Pakistan."<sup>2</sup> Kinzer evidently believed that Zia's support of the Afghan Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet Union was motivated by a desire to advance Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan and to divert international attention away from Pakistan's alleged development of nuclear weapons. Although greater Islamization of both Pakistan and Afghanistan was indeed an important objective of Zia's regime, nuclear

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1. George Crile: *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 480.

2. Stephen Kinzer: *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 265.

proliferation was not. Rather, Zia's support of the Mujahideen was meant to provide Pakistan with greater security by keeping Soviet forces from invading Pakistan and by maintaining US support against the threat of Indian aggression.

Muhammed Zia ul-Haq was born in Punjab (a city in what is now Pakistan) on 12 August 1924.<sup>3</sup> He began a military career in the Indian army under British colonial command, which included fighting against the Japanese in the Pacific theater during WWII.<sup>4</sup> When the British left South Asia and Pakistan became an independent nation in 1947, Zia relished the opportunity to serve in a Muslim army; during his command of the Technical Training Wing of the Armored Corps Center at Cherat, he implemented the practice of Quran recitations as part of his recruits' morning formation.<sup>5</sup> Later, when India humiliated the Pakistani army by seizing East Pakistan in 1971, Zia was in Jordan, supporting King Hussein in a fight against the Palestinian Liberation Organization.<sup>6</sup> Zia's success in this assignment resulted in a promotion to major general, leaving him one of the few high-ranking officers in Pakistan unsullied by the debacle of 1971.<sup>7</sup>

In 1974, only three years after Pakistan's miserable defeat in East Pakistan, India detonated its first nuclear bomb.<sup>8</sup> With that detonation, what had previously been a battle for influence and power in the region became an existential threat to Pakistan. To counter India, Pakistan pursued its own nuclear weapons program during the administration of ruling Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The cost of this program soon proved to be higher than Pakistan could afford; the United States disapproved of the nuclear program and consequently suspended its aid to Pakistan in April 1977.<sup>9</sup> This suspension damaged US-Pakistani relations so severely that it would take a change in leadership in both countries to bring them back together.

This change in Pakistani leadership came in July 1977. In answer to growing civil unrest caused by an allegedly rigged national election, Major General Zia

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3. Hussain Haqqani: *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 112.

4. Khalid Mahmud Arif: *Working with Zia: Pakistan's Power Politics 1977-1988* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 116.

5. *Ibid*, 117.

6. *Ibid*, 118.

7. Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014), 58.

8. Arif, *Working with Zia*, 362.

9. *Ibid*, 332.

ul-Haq declared martial law and overthrew Prime Minister Bhutto on 5 July 1977.<sup>10</sup> Though martial law was meant to persist only until parliamentary elections could be held, military rule continued indefinitely, culminating in Zia's ascension to the presidency on 16 September 1978.<sup>11</sup> No sooner had the new regime taken hold than Islamic reforms began in Pakistan at Zia's behest. The number of state-recognized Islamic schools increased threefold, and moral uprightness became a criterion for military promotion.<sup>12</sup> Less than six months after Zia assumed the presidency, he reformed the penal code to better reflect Islamic principles.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these many changes, Islamization was not Zia's only priority. From the earliest days of his regime, Zia understood the external threats facing his country, and he began long-term plans to mitigate them. Along with expanding Pakistan's military, Zia dramatically increased the size and scope of the country's chief intelligence bureau, the Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI). This agency began developing strong ties with financially powerful nations such as Pakistan's Muslim brother Saudi Arabia. More importantly, however, the ISI began to build ties with the CIA.<sup>14</sup> To lead the ISI during this crucial period, Zia chose his lifelong friend, Akhtar Abdur Rahman. Aside from being well-qualified for the position after a lengthy career in the Pakistani army, General Akhtar had the acutely desirable trait of being a vehement enemy of India, a quality that no self-respecting member of Zia's regime could do without.<sup>15</sup>

Pakistan's security concerns became more complicated when Soviet tanks rolled into neighboring Afghanistan in the final week of 1979. With the Soviet 40th Red Army much too close for comfort, Pakistan faced another existential threat besides that of a nuclear-capable India. Worse still, the two nations threatening Pakistan, India and the Soviet Union, were cooperating with each other, as illustrated by a CIA communique dated 1 January 1980: "Zia on the ropes, seemingly abandoned by U.S. Indira<sup>16</sup> has good chance to return in India; her government likely to be even more pro-Soviet in outlook than

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10. Shahid Javed Burki, "Zia's Eleven Years: A Chronology of Important Events," in *Pakistan Under the Military: Eleven Years of Zia ul-Haq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 155.

11. *Ibid.*, 157.

12. Riedel, *What We Won*, 59.

13. Burki, *Pakistan Under the Military*, 157.

14. Riedel, *What We Won*, 59–60.

15. *Ibid.*

16. "Indira" here refers to Indira Gandhi, the president of India at the time.

present government.”<sup>17</sup> That Zia felt “abandoned” by the United States was demonstrated again later in 1980, when President Carter offered Zia a meager four hundred million dollar economic and military aid package to support Pakistan against the Soviets.<sup>18</sup> Regarding this offer, Zia asked a foreign journalist, “When the Soviet weapons are breathing fire on Pakistan’s border, what can she buy with that measly amount to enhance her national security? Peanuts?”<sup>19</sup> Zia rejected the offer, and American news media were quick to poke fun at the former peanut farmer, President Carter. Fortunately for Zia, 1981 marked a pronounced shift in US-Pakistani relations. Because of Pakistan’s status as the frontline state against the Soviet Union’s incursion into Afghanistan, the CIA recognized the threat that the Soviets posed to Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> The more cooperative Ronald Reagan agreed, and in September 1981 he approved a \$3.2 billion economic and military aid package, which included several American F-16 fighter aircraft.<sup>21</sup>

This change of heart in Washington was not exclusively a result of a change in the presidency; it also came from the Pakistani leadership’s shrewd handling of the Afghan question. From the earliest days of the Soviet-Afghan War, Akhtar of the ISI recognized an opportunity to secure Pakistan against both of its major threats by helping the Afghan Mujahideen fight the Soviets. By aiding the Mujahideen, Akhtar told Zia, Pakistan could protect itself from Soviet invasion by keeping the Soviets bogged down in an indecisive war in Afghanistan. Furthermore, aiding the Mujahideen militarily (and Afghan refugees with humanitarian aid) would go a long way in regaining the American support that Pakistan had lost in the previous years.<sup>22</sup> The result of Zia and Akhtar’s decision

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17. Central Intelligence Agency. *CIA, DDCI Notes + NIO/USSR-EE, January 1, 1980*, *Secret*. ed. Matthew Aid, in the Cold War Intelligence Online, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://primarysources.brillonline.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/browse/cold-war-intelligence>.

18. To put this amount into perspective, the United States gave Israel a \$5.1 billion package (nearly thirteen times the sum offered to Pakistan) that same year. See <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/total-u-s-foreign-aid-to-israel-1949-present>.

19. Arif, *Working with Zia*, 335.

20. Central Intelligence Agency. *CIA, Memorandum, NIC Warning Agenda for April 13, 1981*, *Top Secret*. ed. Matthew Aid in the Cold War Intelligence Online, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://primarysources.brillonline.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/browse/cold-war-intelligence>.

21. Arif, *Working with Zia*, 342.

22. Muhammed Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan’s Untold Story* (Melksham, UK: Redwood Press, 1992), 25–26.

to provide aid to Afghanistan was an enormously complex operation between the CIA and the ISI to fund, equip, and train Afghan Mujahideen to fight the Soviets.

This operation began small. Less than two weeks after Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, the CIA began providing the ISI with dated British Enfield bolt-action rifles to give to the Mujahideen.<sup>23</sup> The CIA did not want the weapons to be traced back to the United States; Pakistani cooperation enabled the CIA to focus on acquiring Soviet-style weapons that could not be easily traced. Eventually, the CIA purchased rifles, heavy and light machine guns, and shoulder-fired rockets from Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and China, before turning them over to the ISI for distribution.<sup>24</sup> This clandestine armament of the Afghan Mujahideen grew steadily until it became undeniably overt when the CIA began sending American-made, state-of-the-art FIM-92 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in 1986.<sup>25</sup>

While the CIA procured the weapons, the ISI undertook the true heavy lifting of arming and training the Mujahideen. After weapons and supplies arrived in the Pakistani port of Karachi, the ISI had the uniquely challenging task of getting them into the hands of the Afghans. This operation was complex and dangerous, and the ISI constantly strived to keep supplies moving. Secrecy was paramount to protect the shipments which, if discovered, could become a very vulnerable target.<sup>26</sup> To maximize munitions' potential, the ISI distributed weaponry to the several parties of Mujahideen based not on their size, but on their combat effectiveness. The more effective a party proved itself to be in accomplishing missions assigned by the ISI, the more weapons and supplies it received. Much to the CIA's distaste, this frequently meant that hardline Islamic fundamentalist parties received more weapons than other groups.<sup>27</sup> This has caused some critics, including Stephen Kinzer, to suggest that Zia consciously chose to support radical Islam in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> The ISI's operations' procedure, however, suggest that combat effectiveness, not religious fundamentalism,

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23. Riedel, *What We Won*, 103.

24. Kurt Lohbeck: *Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington DC: Regnery Gateway Inc., 1993), 183.

25. Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 117.

26. *Ibid.*, 99–102.

27. *Ibid.*, 105.

28. Kinzer, *Overthrow*, 267–268.

was the standard. The ISI used specifically planned missions as the basis of what equipment and training to give to the Mujahideen: rather than simply giving fighters weapons and telling them to kill communists, they were told how to use a set of weapons to accomplish a specific goal. If the Mujahideen succeeded with their mission, they were given more. This process minimized the unnecessary wasting of equipment and maximized combat effectiveness, evidenced by the casualties on the Soviet side.<sup>29</sup> According to official Soviet reports, losses were high; according to Yuri Khlusov of the 40th Red Army, they were staggering:

During the one and a half years that I spent in Afghanistan, I lost 35–37 good friends, 7 of whom were especially close. . . . [W]e were told that 19,000 Soviet soldiers had been killed in Afghanistan, 2,000 of them by their own hand. This number of killed was calculated up to the end of 1981. If the officially announced 19,000 killed were to be multiplied by ten, it would be closer to the truth. There was an incalculable number of wounded.<sup>30</sup>

Yuri's account is far from unique; similar accounts from Soviet soldiers speak of dismally poor morale and rampant suicide.<sup>31</sup> With the CIA's help, the ISI was able to focus its attention on distributing supplies to the most effective groups of Mujahideen, and thus achieve Akhtar's vision of eliminating the threat of a Soviet invasion of Pakistan.

Throughout all of these operations, the ISI jealously guarded access to the Mujahideen from the CIA, and even from other agencies within Zia's government. Although this generated no shortage of frustration from the Americans, it made sense to Zia for two critical reasons. First, the ISI was better positioned geographically to make decisions about how to conduct the war. The ISI could collect and act on intelligence very quickly through Pakistan's decidedly porous border with Afghanistan, whereas the CIA would have to expend enormous resources to achieve that same flexibility. The second reason for the ISI's control was far more political. Had Zia allowed the CIA to interact directly with

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29. Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 16–117.

30. Yuri Khlusov, "Yuri K.," in *The Soldier's Story: Soviet Veterans Remember the Afghan War*, ed. Anna Heinamaa, Maija Leppanen, and Yuri Yurchenko, trans. by A.D. Haun. (Berkeley, Regents of the University of California, 1994), 32–33.

31. Arytom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 121.



the Mujahideen, he would have lost considerable leverage with Washington. Both the US and Pakistani governments clearly understood that supporting the Mujahideen was the primary reason that the United States renewed its lapsed interest in Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> Having seen US support of Pakistan falter at several points during his career, Zia likely wanted to maintain assurance that the United States would not halt its support of Pakistan by seizing control of operations from the ISI.

That Zia would be so cunning in maintaining US economic and military aid should come as no surprise. Before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Pakistan had been under the shadow of a prospective Indian hegemony. India's nuclear capability in particular created a complex security issue in South Asia, described well by Zia's Vice Chief of Army Staff, Khalid Mahmud Arif:

Denunciation of nuclear weapons and their destruction are better options than the strategy of deterrence. However, if one country in a troubled region adopts a policy of deterrence, the other is hardly left with a viable alternative. In this scenario, neither India nor Pakistan can unilaterally renounce the nuclear option for reasons of security, public opinion, and national prestige. Either both the countries jointly renounce the nuclear weapons or both should acquire them.<sup>33</sup>

Arif's position on the nuclear issue took a much harder line than Zia's. Evidence suggests that Zia was more concerned with reaching a balance of power in South Asia than with acquiring nuclear weapon. For example, on 23 October 1985, Zia declared before the United Nations that "Pakistan has neither the capability nor the desire to develop nuclear weapons."<sup>34</sup> In this same address, Zia recognized that elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide should be the goal of humanity, yet he pragmatically observed that first addressing the issue regionally, rather than globally, was a more immediately attainable goal. To that end, he suggested that South Asia be declared a nuclear-free zone, guaranteed

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32. Central Intelligence Agency. *CIA, National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 11/37-85, The Soviet Presence in Afghanistan::Implications for the Regional Powers and the United States, April 1985, Secret.* ed. Matthew Aid, in the Cold War Intelligence Online, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://primarysources.brillonline.com.erl.lib.byu.edu/browse/cold-war-intelligence>.

33. Arif, *Working with Zia*, 384.

34. Muhammed Zia ul-Haq, *President Zia-ul-Haq's Address to the 40th Commemorative Session of the United Nations General Assembly* (October 23, 1985), in JSTOR, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41394222>.

by India and Pakistan's simultaneous entrance into the Non-Proliferation Treaty.<sup>35</sup> This even-handed approach to the nuclear issue in South Asia suggests that Zia was not so concerned with acquiring a viable nuclear weapon for Pakistan as much as he was with countering or eliminating the nuclear threat that India posed.

Zia's desire for a balance of power can also be seen in his acceptance of aid from the United States offered under the Reagan administration. The \$3.2 billion aid package offered in 1981 came with the condition that assistance would be terminated "if it [Pakistan] transfers a nuclear explosive device from any country or detonates such a device."<sup>36</sup> In other words, Zia sacrificed the immediate possibility of developing a nuclear weapon during his regime in favor of maintaining American aid. That military and economic support from the United States would even the balance of power between India and Pakistan was certainly understood in New Delhi. It is likely for this reason that India so vehemently opposed Carter's proposed support in 1980. So loud were India's objections that Carter did not increase his offer beyond the four hundred million dollars that Zia called "peanuts."<sup>37</sup>

From Pakistan's declared policies, as well as India's response, it is clear that American aid was Zia's preferred alternative to a nuclear deterrent. Zia's trump card in guaranteeing support from the United States was the ISI's operations in Afghanistan. A CIA National Intelligence Estimate from April 1985 succinctly stated the following:

U.S. support for Pakistan—principally in the supply of modern weapons—is essential to Pakistan's survival. Support for the Afghan resistance has allowed Islamabad to develop closer ties to the United States . . . strengthening its defenses while . . . keeping the Soviets from consolidating their hold on Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup>

The effectiveness of Zia's Afghan operations in countering the existential threat of Indian dominance can be seen both in the money invested in Pakistan

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35. Ibid.

36. Arif, *Working with Zia*, 343.

37. Ibid., 334.

38. Central Intelligence Agency. *CIA, National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 11/37-85, The Soviet Presence in Afghanistan: Implications for the Regional Powers and the United States, April 1985, Secret.*

by the United States and in India's response. Over the course of the Soviet-Afghan War, US aid to Pakistan increased from the four hundred million dollars offered by Carter and rejected by Zia in 1980, to \$3.2 billion in 1981 and eventually \$4.02 billion in 1986.<sup>39</sup> The aforementioned National Intelligence Estimate described India's reaction to US-Pakistani cooperation as follows.

In New Delhi's view, the renewal of military ties between Pakistan and the United States and the permanent U.S. naval presence in the Indian Ocean are a direct result of the war in Afghanistan and a major setback to India's goal of regional hegemony.<sup>40</sup> Evidently, by helping the CIA humiliate the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Zia managed to address both of the greatest threats faced by Pakistan in the 1980s.

At first glance, Muhammed Zia ul-Haq may appear to be exactly what Stephen Kinzer and others have made him out to be: a fundamentalist Islamic despot obsessed with obtaining a nuclear weapon. However, as we come to understand him in the context in which he lived, particularly with respect to the dramatic threats faced by Pakistan during his administration, he emerges as a remarkably shrewd and realistic player in international politics. True, he had a vision of "a pan-Islamic revival that will one day win over the Muslims of the Soviet Union."<sup>41</sup> Yet Zia proved himself to be as pragmatic as he was idealistic: a master of exploiting geopolitical crises to Pakistan's benefit. When Zia overthrew Bhutto in 1977, Pakistan faced the seemingly impossible task of protecting itself from an India that had repeatedly demonstrated its military superiority. Furthermore, relations with the United States were at an all-time low when the Soviet 40th Red Army was at the proverbial gates in 1979. Rather than caving under these pressures, Zia saw supporting the Mujahideen as an opportunity to keep the Soviets away from Pakistan and to ensure US support against India.

Although Congressman Wilson's comparison of Zia to Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill was perhaps exaggerated, one must wonder what Zia's legacy might have been had his vision not been cut short by his death in a mysterious plane crash in 1988. While other Islamic leaders of the twentieth century

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39. Arif, *Working with Zia*, 345.

40. Central Intelligence Agency. *CIA, National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 11/37-85, The Soviet Presence in Afghanistan::Implications for the Regional Powers and the United States, April 1985, Secret.*

41. Riedel, *What We Won*, 59.

had a similar vision of a unified Islamic alliance, few, if any of them, had Zia's successful track record.<sup>42</sup> Had Zia survived, it is not entirely implausible to think that Pakistan might have been able to help Afghanistan remain far more stable in the wake of the Soviet pullout, even if it never became the strong Islamic state that Zia had initially envisioned. Sadly, the United States all but forgot about South Asia following Zia's death, and left Afghanistan to tear itself apart with the CIA's weapons. Now, nearly twenty years later, the price of this negligence is still visible.

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42. Zia's efforts not only promoted national security for Pakistan, but also helped develop its economy; during his eleven years in office, Pakistan's GDP doubled. See Shahid Javed Burki, "Pakistan's Economy Under Zia," in *Pakistan Under the Military: Eleven Years of Zia ul-Haq* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1991), 87.

