

Pakistan Affairs (Security)

ASSIGNMENT

Discuss how Pakistan's geopolitical location has made it a battle ground for proxy wars since the Cold war era.

Introduction:

Pakistan's geography places it at the heart of some of the most volatile region in the world. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the middle East and close to the Persian Gulf, Pakistan borders India, Afghanistan, Iran and China with proximity to oil-rich states of the Gulf. Since the cold war, that value has repeatedly drawn great regional powers into competition on and through Pakistani territory. Because external actors have pursued their strategic aim via local proxies rather than direct confrontation, Pakistan has often become a battleground for proxy wars.

Why geography matters:

1) Frontline Position: Gateway to South & Central Asia

- Pakistan sits at the junction of South Asia, Central Asia and the middle East, making it a gateway ~~between~~ between energy-rich Central Asia & the Indian Ocean.
- Its 2,640 km border with Afghanistan has historically placed it at the heart of Afghan conflicts. First during Soviet invasion (1979-1989), later during the Taliban era, and then the post 9/11 on terror. Any power seeking influence in Afghanistan whether the Soviet Union, the U.S or regional states like India & Iran had to engage with Pakistan, making it indispensable in great power strategies.

2) Link to Global Energy Supply lines

- Pakistan's coastline provides access to one of the world's busiest sea lanes carrying middle Eastern oil. The deep sea port of Gwadar has immense strategic value located near the Strait of Hormuz, a choke-point for global energy supplies.

- This has made Pakistan attractive for China (CPEC investments), concerning for India and the U.S & strategically relevant for Gulf monarchies.

3) Neighborhood Rivalries

- India-Pakistan rivalry $\Rightarrow$ Pakistan's eastern frontier with India is one of the most militarized borders in the world. The Kashmir conflict has internationalized Pakistan's geography by pulling in global actors.
- Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry $\Rightarrow$ Pakistan, with its Sunni majority and sizable Shia minority, lies on the frontline of ~~rivalry~~ Riyadh-Tehran competition, both seeking influence with its borders.
- China-US Rivalry $\Rightarrow$ Pakistan's strategic cooperation with China (e.g. CPEC, military collaboration) clashes with U.S objectives in the Indo Pacific, making Pakistan part of wide geostrategic contest.

4) Domestic Vulnerabilities

- Pakistan's tribal areas (FATA) & Balochistan have historically had the weak state penetration, making them fertile ground for non-state actors & foreign sponsored powers.
- The Durand line with Afghanistan is porous, allowing militant infiltration, arms smuggling & drug trafficking. all exploited by foreign powers.
- Ethnic & sectarian diversity within Pakistan (Pashtun, Baluch, Shia, Sunni) has been used by external actors to fund or influence proxy groups.

5) Nuclear Geography

- Pakistan is the only muslim-majority nuclear state, which amplifies its importance in regional & global security calculations.
- Its nuclear program has drawn interest, pressure & suspicions from global powers making it a focal point for both strategic alliance.

6) Buffer Zone

- Pakistan has suffered as a buffer state between competing powers like during cold war between the Soviet Union & US aligned states.
& Today between US aligned India & China.
- The buffer states why powers have often used Pakistan indirectly through proxies rather than direct confrontation.

Historical Phases of Proxy involvement -

During the cold war (1950s - 1970s), Pakistan's early alignment with united states, through membership in alliances such as SEATO & CENTO, firmly placed it in the western bloc against Soviet influence. This Partnership brought Pakistan military and intelligence support while simultaneously turning into a platform for anti-communist activities in the region.

The most significant Phase came with Afghan Jihad (1979-1988), when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan transformed Pakistan into frontline state of the U.S led campaign to undermine Soviet power. The U.S, Saudi Arabia & Pakistan's ISI coordinated arms, training & funding for Afghan Mujahideen, with Pakistan's territory serving as the logistical and operational hub of the proxy war. While the Soviet withdrawal was hailed as a geopolitical success, Pakistan paid a heavy price in the form of weapons proliferation, ideological radicalisation & militant networks that later turned against the state itself.

In the Post-Soviet Period of the 1990s, Afghanistan descended into civil war, becoming a battleground for regional ~~proxies~~ Proxies - Pakistan seeking strategic depth against India, threw its support behind the Taliban, while Saudi Arabia pursued religious influence & Iran backed Shia faction. Pakistan's backing of the Taliban not only made it a key stakeholder in Afghanistan's internal conflicts but also tied it directly to the wider regional competition.

Following 9/11 & the U.S led war on Terror (2001-2010), Pakistan once again became a frontline ally of Washington. It provides logistical routes, intelligence cooperation, and bases for counterterrorism operations. However, Pakistan was simultaneously accused of sheltering militant sanctuaries such as Haqqani Network & the Afghan Taliban. Drone strikes, NATO supply lines, covert intelligence cooperation strained relations, while militant backlash turned Pakistan's tribal areas & cities into battlegrounds.

In the multipolar era (2010-Present), Pakistan ~~remains~~ continues to be caught in overlapping rivalries. The China-U.S competition has elevated Pakistan's importance due to CPEC & Beijing's Belt & Road Initiative. At the same time Saudi Arabia & Iran continue to exert influence within Pakistan through sectarian & ideology proxies. While the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry over

Kashmir sustains allegations of cross-border insurgency. Pakistan remains deeply entangled in global & regional proxy contests.

Consequences for Pakistan

- 1) Security Costs: - Pakistan has endured Persistent terrorism, insurgencies in the tribal regions, & unrest in Balochistan as a direct result of Proxy wars. Cross border militancy from Afghanistan further complicates the security environment, making internal stability fragile. Frequent military operations highlights the heavy toll on both the state & citizens.
- 2) Economic burden: Decades of conflict have drained Pakistan's economy through destruction of infrastructure, mass displacement & loss of investor confidence. The War on Terror alone has cost the country over \$150 billion. Security concerns also restrict trade & tourism, keeping economic growth below its potential.
- 3) Political & Institutional strain: Proxy wars have militarised Pakistan's Policy making & allowed intelligence agencies to dominate national decisions. This has eroded civilian supremacy & weakened democratic institutions. Frequent Policy shifts under external Pressure also undermine Political stability.
- 4) Social Fragmentation: Sectarian rivalries, radical ideologies & violent narratives have fractured Pakistan's social fabrics. External actors have exploited religious & ethnic divides, fueling extremism. The result is deep mistrust among communities & recurring cycles of violence.
- 5) Diplomatic Dilemmas: Pakistan constantly struggles to balance ties between competing Power such as The U.S & China or Saudi Arabia & Iran. These rivalries spill over into domestic Politics & sectarian tensions. The dependence on foreign aid further reduces Pakistan's freedom of diplomatic choice.

Why Proxy strategies persist

Proxy strategies in Pakistan persist due to a mix external & internal dynamics. For global and regional powers, Proxies offer a tool of denial and low cost competition, allowing them to achieve strategic objectives without the risks of direct war, especially where interests are significant but not existential. At the same time, local actors such as militant groups, Political Factions, & separatist movements willingly accept external patronage to advance their agendas, keeping the proxy ecosystem alive. Structural weaknesses like including Porous borders, limited governance in frontier areas & entrenched Patronage networks further facilitates the use of Proxies, making Pakistan vulnerable & attractive battleground for proxy wars.

Policy Prescription for Pakistan

- 1) **Strengthen border governance**: Credible Policing, development & intelligence to deny militants sanctuary.
- 2) **Calibrate external partnership**: diversify alliances while ~~insisting~~ insisting on respect for Sovereignty & accountability of external aid & military cooperation.
- 3) **Regional diplomacy**: Pursue Cooperative Frameworks with Afghanistan, Iran & India to reduce space for proxies. on the other hand engage with China & Gulf states transparently.
- 4) **civil military balance & oversight**: ensure intelligence operations & external partnerships are under clearer civilian oversight to prevent unintended blowback.

Conclusion

Pakistan's geography make it strategically valuable; that same geography, combined with domestic vulnerabilities & external rivalries, has repeatedly turned the country into a battle-field for proxy wars from cold wars to today. Managing this legacy requires coherent internal reforms, shrewd diplomacy & a long-term emphasis on denying space to proxies through development, good governance & transparent external relations. Only by addressing both external pressures & internal fault-lines can Pakistan reduce its role as an arena for other powers' conflict.