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Development of Threat Perception

Pakistan’s adversarial relations with neighboring India play a vital role in the formation of its official threat perception and national security plans. Since 1947, the policy-maker’s greatest concern has been to find means to thwart India’s hegemonic designs or plans to gain a prominent status in the region’s geo-politics. This was the basic framework in which the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was interpreted. The projection of the Soviet threat was vital for Pakistan’s military modernization plans. This, however, led to embedding Afghanistan in Pakistan’s security architecture. The real threat to Pakistan’s security, which was more internal in nature, was a direct manifestation of Islamabad’s Afghan policy. The fact remains that after 1979 Pakistan’s primary source of threat continued to be India. The heightened India–Pakistan hostility culminated in increased tension and a nuclear arms race.

The Afghan crisis and Pakistan’s security

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan added a new dimension to the Pakistan government’s threat perception. Officials presented the strategic development on the country’s northern borders as a direct threat to Pakistan’s security. Islamabad was of the view that, after consolidating its control over Afghanistan, Moscow would proceed further with the objective of reaching the ‘warm waters’ through Pakistan.\(^1\) Although opinion on this perception was divided among the Pakistani leadership at the time, such a projection was considered expedient in order to cement US relations, which in the past had been impaired because of divergent views of Washington and Islamabad on Pakistan nuclear proliferation. In one respect, Pakistan’s Afghan policy written in the
early 1980s was a continuation of its earlier policy that viewed Afghanistan as a state inimical to Islamabad’s security interests. The threat that it posed to Pakistan’s security, however, was not comparable to that of India. With the Soviet troops taking control of Afghanistan, the government in Kabul was seen as a potent threat. The impact of Pakistan’s Afghan policy on Islamabad–Washington relations was noticeable.

The only possibility of acquiring American military and economic aid was through convergence of views between the two countries. This chance was provided in the 1980s when Washington desperately searched for a formidable ally in South Asia to counter what was perceived as the Soviet threat to the free world. Like in the 1950s and 1960s, when American military hardware was transferred to Pakistan in bulk, the Reagan administration agreed to strengthen its South Asian ally through arms transfers and economic aid. The equipment transferred thus was a major contributory factor in formulating Islamabad’s offensive posture towards the former USSR. Considering Islamabad’s hostile relations with New Delhi, this equipment gave Pakistan the ability to stand up to its traditional adversary, India, as had happened in 1965. The war led to an American arms embargo imposed on both the South Asian countries, but Pakistan was the most affected because its dependence upon American equipment was greater than India’s. The overriding factor was military modernization. Pakistan’s then President, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, was certain that an agreement with Washington regarding containment of the Soviet threat could help him obtain assistance from the United States. This, he or any other leader could not have hoped to get prior to 1979–80. It was a matter of how Islamabad played its cards. The Pakistani propaganda about Soviet plans dovetailed with the anti-Communist hype in the US that had grown especially after Ronald Reagan’s ascendancy to power. In the US, the political mood favored the strategy to punish Moscow for what appeared to be the USSR’s transgression of the norms of East–West relations laid down after the Second World War. It was Cold War politics rather than a popular belief in America that its South Asian ally’s integrity was at stake, and this led Washington to believe the Pakistani propaganda. According to Professor Stephen Cohen, who was working with the US State Department at the time, opinion in the American Congress was divided. Twenty per cent of members thought that the USSR’s objective was merely the invasion of Afghanistan; 60 per cent thought it was to establish influence in the Gulf; and only 10–20 per cent were of the view that there were plans to invade