Reagan, Nixon and Pakistani

RONALD REAGAN HAD A LASTING impact on American-Pakistani relations during the 1980s. To fully understand his impact, one has to begin with the evolution of US-Pakistan relations during the 1950s, when Richard Nixon served as vice president in the Dwight D Fisenhower administration.

Nixon had two missions: dispel liberals and weed out communists. To accomplish these missions, he visited 54 countries during his eight-year tenure, becoming the most widely travelled vice president in US history. His first visit to Pakistan took place in December 1953, where he formed a close relationship with General Ayub Khan, who had been appointed the commander-in-chief of the army two years earlier. After returning from this visit, Nixon expressed his strong interest in providing military aid to Pakistan. On Christmas Eve, he briefed the US National Security Council with the compelling words, "Pakistan is a country I would like to do everything for."

Earlier, during a US visit, Ayub had made a deep impression on President Eisenhower, Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Thus, when Ghulam Mohammed unconstitutionally dismissed Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin on April 17, 1953, and Ayub validated it by calling it an 'Act of God,' there was no protest from the Americans. In fact, Nixon speaks fondly of Ghulam Mohammed in his 1982 book, 'Leaders'.

OP-ED



Ahmad Faruqui

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In American eyes, Ayub was a handsome soldier who could have walked off a Hollywood set for the 'The Bengal Lancers'. With his clipped Sandhurst accent and martial demeanour, Ayub projected the spit-and-polish

image of the British Indian army. It was natural that Washington would recruit him to fight communism. Thus Dulles assured Congress in closed hearings in June 1953 that the Pakistanis 'are going to fight any communist invasion with their bare fists if they have to'. In September of that year, General Ayub promised the US State Department, 'our army can be your army if you want us'.

In 1954, Washington signed him up. It signed a military assistance programme with Pakistan, despite Nehru's objections. The package included equipment for 4 infantry divisions, 600 Sherman and Patton tanks for 1.5 armoured divisions, 120 F-86F Sabre fighter bombers for six air force squadrons, 10 Lockheed T-33A jet trainers and 26 Martin B-57B Canberra bombers. In addition, the package included logistical support and assistance for upgrading Pakistani bases to near NATO standards.

The same year Pakistan joined SEATO and then the Baghdad Pact in 1955 (later CENTO), becoming America's most allied-ally in Asia. When Ayub seized power in 1958, Washington did not condemn it. US expectations were fulfilled a year later when Ayub awarded a 10-year lease to the US Air Force for setting up a 'communications facility' in Badabir, ten miles from Peshawar. The USAF flew U-2 reconnaissance aircraft from this base to spy over Soviet installations, a fact which only came to light

after a plane flown by Capt Gary Powers was shot over the USSR in 1960.

To demonstrate his continuing loyalty to Washington, General Ayub conferred the Nishane-Pakistan, Pakistan's highest civilian award, on Richard Nixon and Dwight Eisenhower.

Nixon became the US president in 1969. He visited Lahore in August, five months after Avub's resignation. President General Yahva Khan greeted Nixon as 'an old friend' of Pakistan. Saying it was his sixth visit to Pakistan but the first as president, Nixon declared that he had always 'found a warm welcome from a great and friendly people' in Pakistan, In 1970. Nixon wrote to Yahva and expressed his 'admiration for the great skill you have shown in leading Pakistan through a difficult transition period'. He spoke warmly of Yahva's 'statesmanship, courage and sensitivity to the special conditions facing Pakistan'. Yahva responded by opening a secret channel between Washington and Beijing, which culminated in Kissinger's secret visit to China in July 1971. Nixon reciprocated by maintaining a 'tilt toward Pakistan' during the ensuing crisis with India over East Pakistan. However, the Indians saw through the cosmetic nature of this commitment and invaded East Pakistan, leading to its secession.

The Soviet military was in Afghanistan when Ronald Reagan became the US president. Once again, the Pakistani army was

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recruited to fighting communism. This time, a ragtag army of holy warriors who would do battle with the Evil Empire. Welcoming a delegation of the mujahideen to the White House, Reagan said they would one day occupy the same position in Afghan history as the Founding Fathers of the US did in American history. The blowback from the Afghan-Soviet War continues to roil Pakistan

and the US to this day.

For the US, military rule in Pakistan has always been the lesser of two evils. During the cold war, the greater evil was the communist threat. Thus, the US did not object to Ghulam Mohammad's dismal of a constitutionally valid government. It did not object to Ayub Khan's coup d'état or to Yahya Khan's campaign of repression against the civilian population of East Pakistan. In Zia's period, General K M Arif boldly told Reagan's Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, "We would not like to hear from you the type of government we should have." Nonchalantly, Haig replied, "General, your internal situation is your problem."

In the present age, the greater evil for Washington is the terrorist threat and that explains why it continues to support military rule in Pakistan. The Bush administration has given Pakistan the status of a major non-NATO ally. This is a symbolic gesture that will not yield Pakistan the F-16s it has long

sought, Ambassador Qazi's euphoric comment about this 'historical development', notwithstanding. Pakistan's generals remain true to Ayub's commitment about making their army Washington's army. They will even send Pakistani troops to Iraq and recognise Israel, if that will re-institute their status as America's most allied-ally in Asia.

None of this is a new development. General Musharraf regards Nixon's book, 'Leaders,' as one of his favourites and considers Nixon a role model. It is increasingly difficult to quibble with the cynics who say that Pakistan's military leaders are little more than a lickspittle for Washington: they jump even

higher than requested.

By strengthening the army at the expense of all other domestic institutions, American aid to Pakistan has led to adventurism in Kashmir and worse, to the partition of the country in 1971. The army is now almost fifty percent larger and the country smaller and less secure. What sounded like an inexpensive way of defending Pakistan borders to Ayub has turned out to be a rather expensive way of defending American interests in the region.

Dr Ahmad Faruqui is an economist and author of "Rethinking the National Security of Pakistan". He can be reached at faruqui@pacbell.net