

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Pakistani conflictual world-making in international politics: The Afghan–Soviet War, Cold War counter-insurgency, and the struggles for decolonisation

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(Received 11 June 2025; revised 23 October 2025; accepted 2 November 2025)

## Abstract

This article theorises Pakistan's role in the Afghan–Soviet War (1979–1989) as a form of 'conflictual world-making' – a process through which postcolonial states and societies simultaneously contest and reproduce global orders. Moving beyond Eurocentric narratives of superpower rivalry, it demonstrates how Pakistan's state and societal actors actively reshaped the Cold War from the margins. Drawing on state archives and movement periodicals, the analysis reveals a dialectical struggle: while the military establishment enforced a U.S.-led imperial order, borderland movements pursued alternative, anti-imperial world-making projects. The article develops the concept of 'imperial-anti-imperial relationism' to capture this entanglement. By centring these South-South encounters and transboundary mobilisations, it recasts the Afghan war not as a mere proxy conflict between the superpowers, but as a decisive crucible where late Cold War geopolitics collided with the unfinished project of decolonisation. The argument compels a rethinking of world order struggles, insisting that the Global South's generative margins are essential to understanding the end of the Cold War and the violent birth of our contemporary world disorder.

**Keywords:** Afghan–Soviet War; Cold War; decolonisation; geopolitics; Pakistan; world order struggles

## Introduction

Journeying through northern Pakistan in 1988, Pakistani writer and activist Eqbal Ahmed and U.S. historian Richard Barnett came across a spectacle in the valleys outside Peshawar. They witnessed Buzkashi, the ancient Central Asian sport where horsemen battle for a goat carcass which they race towards the opponent's goal. In its raw, chaotic struggle – a visceral, relentless contest for a single, contested prize – they saw a perfect allegory for the conflicts that have long ravaged Afghanistan. At the match, the scholars met Sayd Marjooh, an ex-professor at Kabul University. They asked his thoughts on the game. Marjooh's sarcastic response struck a chord: 'Afghanistan is the calf in this *Buzkashi* between Moscow and Washington ... We have brought it here to Pakistan. Here you will understand much about Afghanistan and this war'.<sup>1</sup>

Pakistan was not a mere bystander but a central protagonist of the late Cold War, its contested international identity decisively shaped the trajectory of the Afghan–Soviet War (1979–1989). The conflict represented a historic nexus in which civil war, superpower intervention, and foreign-backed insurgency collided, haunted by the unresolved legacy of decolonisation. Through its

<sup>1</sup> Eqbal Ahmad and Richard Barnett, 'Bloody games,' *The New Yorker* (11 April 1988).

organising of the anti-communist jihad, Pakistan did not just host this war; it fundamentally redefined the very geography of the Cold War, shifting its epicentre to the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands. There, the state engineered a new architecture of power by fusing militarised religious nationalism with a global counter-insurgency agenda, aligning security, faith, and geopolitics into a potent and enduring force. The consequences of this fusion would reverberate far beyond 1989, permanently shaping the moral and strategic grammars of intervention into the present day.

This article argues that Pakistan's engagement in the Afghan–Soviet War exemplifies a form of *conflictual world-making* – a postcolonial dimension of international politics through which states and societies in the global periphery simultaneously contest and reproduce imperial logics. It critiques Eurocentric narratives of the Cold War that prioritise superpower rivalries and interstate diplomacy and downplay the agency of Global South actors. It makes three core claims: (1) that postcolonial societies and states, as in Pakistan, were both arenas and co-architects of competing world-making projects during the Cold War and decolonisation – co-constituting imperial, anti-imperial, and hybrid political entities, strategies, and trajectories; (2) that South-South relations and transboundary mobilisations are essential to incorporate into any accurate account of world order transformations during the late Cold War, which have been overly reduced to North-North bipolarity, thereby underplaying ongoing imperial North-South struggles; (3) and that these events are not simply regional episodes of proxy war but rather histories of global struggles from below, which offer unique perspectives on power in international politics.

Methodologically, the article weaves together movement periodicals and state documents, to reconstruct the multiple, often competing, world-making projects that emerged from state and societal encounters with international actors. By situating Pakistan's encounters in the Afghan–Soviet War within a longer historical arc – from the golden age of anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s and 1960s to the geopolitical realignments of the War on Terror – this article argues that Pakistan's role in the U.S.-led global counter-insurgency was not merely a derivative extension of American strategy, but a creative, if internally fraught, assertion of *postcolonial agency*. The journey from a fragile, emerging state in 1947 to a key belligerent in the Afghan–Soviet War saw Pakistan forged through internal convulsions – including bloody counter-insurgencies, borderland securitisation, and the suppression of progressive movements – all amplified by its strategic integration into the U.S.-led Cold War alliance.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of *conflictual world-making* reframes the Cold War not as a bipolar superpower rivalry, but as a contested theatre of uneven decolonisation. This perspective reveals how great power competition was inextricably linked to the rise of postcolonial states, societies, and social forces at the close of the colonial age. Building on recent studies of postcolonial world-making and global decolonisation, the article demonstrates how Pakistani statecraft and societal struggle entangled anti-imperial solidarities, militarised development, and religious universalism in ways that reveal the dialectical character of *postcolonial internationalism*.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan's conflictual world-making departs from the elite, sovereign-centric model of anti-colonialism. Adom Getachew's conception of anti-colonial world-making in *Worldmaking after Empire*<sup>4</sup> is an important scholarly contribution to theories of decolonisation. It draws on histories of the Black radical tradition to argue for the legacies of decolonisation in the international system. Getachew's scholarship centres on the institutional and international-political dimensions of anti-colonial nationalism, examining the thought and activism of Black Atlantic intellectuals, statesmen, and scholars at the height

<sup>2</sup>Saadia Toor, *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan* (Pluto Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019); David Van Reybrouck, *Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World*, trans. David Colmer (The Bodley Head, 2021); Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2010); Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Christian C. Lentz, *Contested Territory: Dien Bien Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup>Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.

of post-war decolonisation. Her work traces their efforts to articulate the normative and intellectual foundations for democratising international institutions such as the United Nations and for advancing the call for a New International Economic Order. In doing so, it recalibrates decolonisation not only as a project of achieving national self-determination, but as a far-reaching project of anti-colonial world-making – a vision for transforming the global order itself. From this view, ‘empire was a form of domination that exceeded the bilateral relations of colonizer and colonized ... it required a similarly global anticolonial counterpoint that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination.’<sup>5</sup> Getachew’s call for a more expansive notion of decolonisation is essential to understanding the international dimensions of anti-colonial thought and practice. However, the conception of world-making is one of political elites with proximity to the imperial core. What happens to world-making in violent, conflicted, imperialised peripheries?

By contrast, *Pakistani conflictual world-making* is defined by a fundamental schism between ‘world-enforcing’ state projects and counter-hegemonic ‘world-making’ struggles. This was a battle not merely for control of the state, but for Pakistan’s identity and purpose in international orders – a contested struggle between nationalist, Islamist, socialist, and separatist visions of world politics. The desire to wield foreign policy to overcome the limitations placed on Pakistani sovereignty, stemmed partly from widespread anti-imperial solidarities in society and partly from the frustration state architects had with the limitations placed on the postcolonial state in the inter-state system, a frustration shared by anti-colonial leaders worldwide. We can think here of two intertwined trajectories, emerging from hybrid postcolonial contradictions in Pakistani society. The first is the establishment’s desire for security that could disrupt Pakistan’s asymmetry with India and the Soviet Union, through its use of proxy assets and borderland militarisation. The second is the determined autonomy of borderland societies and communities to resist outside forces. *Pakistani conflictual world-making* thus refers to the ways in which Pakistan’s state and societal actors directly and indirectly shaped world politics through the generation of contested struggles during the Afghan–Soviet War.

The concept is rooted in awareness of a fundamental schism; the absence of a unifying, secular national liberation struggle and the subsequent failure of any single vision to definitively capture the state’s postcolonial identity. This internal contestation was overdetermined by Pakistan’s schizophrenic inheritance. Forged *ex nihilo*, its creation was a radical act of political imagination in the forming of a modern Muslim nation-state born from the dismantling of the British Raj. Yet, it simultaneously inherited the colonial state’s very apparatus of power: its military-bureaucratic institutions, its contested borders, and its deep-seated geostrategic ambitions and fears.<sup>6</sup> Locked into political-economic path dependencies, the state’s very foundations were structured to foreclose the more radical upheavals imagined by counter-hegemonic movements. This foundational tension – between an elite project of Muslim nationalism and the insurgent world-making projects it sought to suppress – defined Pakistan as a site of combustible universalisms and perpetually unresolved conflict.<sup>7</sup>

This article theorises this tension as *imperial-anti-imperial relationism*; the dialectical entanglement through which imperial and anti-imperial formations co-constitute one another through material and historical encounters, leaving legacies long after the decline of anti-colonial nationalism. The violence of the late Cold War is itself a consequence of imperial encounters and changes in international power politics during the 1980s, in which the decline of socialist and anti-colonial liberation forces took place concurrently to the revival of U.S.-backed global anti-communism. In this era of late Cold War transformation, anti-communism as a doctrine of war, empowered postcolonial states to reconstitute power, suppress dissent, and coordinate with each other in order to reinforce the system. Two of the consequences of this transformation was the rise of ethno-nationalisms and religiously inspired militarisms, shaping new eras of contention. What emerges,

<sup>5</sup> Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Belknap Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Sadia Bajwa, ‘Reclaiming Pakistaniat’, *Tanqeed*, 2016.

then, is a vision of *imperial–anti-imperial relationism* as the afterlife of empire itself – an enduring choreography of power and resistance shaping the modern world.

The international arrangements that shaped the global counter-insurgency in Afghanistan, gave birth to a phenomenon Madiha Tahir accurately calls the ‘distributed empire’, a decentralised, networked system of partnerships between the Western-led order and postcolonial states and social forces, which enabled Pakistani strategic managers and security forces to operate with unprecedented autonomy and support.<sup>8</sup> A vital framework for understanding the shifting nature of imperial power in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly in the context of the War on Terror, this system emerged, this article argues, during the Afghan war, and is characterised by the outsourcing of war-making and sovereignty, and the blurring of war and peace. By distributing the violence, burdens, and blame of empire, this structure allows great powers to project influence covertly, wielding deniability as a core instrument of its power. Thus, global relations transformed in part through the dispersal of imperial violence to postcolonial security regimes, with devastating consequences for societies in the Global South.

Rather than institutional coherence, this form of world-making derives its analytical power from illuminating the generative friction of Pakistan’s societal and geopolitical contradictions – its strategic alliances, military sociology, and postcolonial internationalisms. The concept reframes Pakistan not as a passive theatre of great power rivalry, but as a pivotal paradox: a space that simultaneously enforced a Western-led global order while also functioning as a transgressive terrain of fierce counter-hegemonic struggle, unleashing anti-colonial and later Islamist universalisms that would haunt security architects in Islamabad and Washington. It is this very relationism that fuels Pakistan’s conflictual world-making, producing its unintended consequences – from the enduring anti-colonial legacies of the borderlands to the violent fallout of Cold War counter-insurgency and the unresolved project of decolonisation.

Pakistan’s embrace of the U.S. Cold War project as far back as the Baghdad Pact in 1955, took place at a time when much of the Global South was joining the Non-Aligned Movement. Pakistan’s incomplete, uneven decolonisation was rooted in the unbroken power of its colonial-era institutions – the military and bureaucracy – which, through coercive practices in the peripheries and strategic convergence with Washington, perpetuated a political order defined by external dependency and internal dominance.<sup>9</sup> This role was not a deviation but the culmination of an uneven decolonisation, wherein a tight nexus of elites perpetuated a colonial-era security apparatus. These tensions provide us with rich resources for thinking deeper about the colonial legacies of the Cold War era, the ways decolonisation often trounced Cold War binaries, and the effect of the Afghan war on the contemporary era. It illuminates the complex ways in which colonial and anti-colonial encounters not only reshape societies ‘over there’ but lead to ‘imperial boomerangs’ which transform the imperial core, producing renewed cycles of conflict and transformation that bind Global North and South in increasingly complex ways.

On one hand, the Pakistani state became a key agent of postcolonial world enforcing, operationalising its borderlands as a launchpad for U.S.-supported counter-insurgency. This elite project framed the conflict through an ideology of anti-communist duty and nationalist jihad, instrumentalising religious universalism to serve the Western-led imperial order. In this capacity, Pakistan functioned as a garrison state, a geopolitical frontier first for the British Raj and, by the 1950s, for American Cold War strategy.<sup>10</sup> In the decade before the Soviet invasion, Pakistani state forces began an assault on socialist, anti-colonial, and separatist factions along the border, and engaged in longer running border disputes with Kabul.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, anti-communism proved to be

<sup>8</sup> Madiha Tahir, ‘The distributed empire of the War on Terror’, *Boston Review* (16 August 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Farooq Naseem Bajwa, *Pakistan and the West: The First Decade, 1947–1957* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Ishtiaq Ahmed, *Pakistan the Garrison State: Origins, Evolution, Consequences, 1947–2011* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan–Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936–1965* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

an especially useful vehicle for Western-backed postcolonial elites to reverse the radical potential of anti-imperial decolonisation, through equating alternative visions of postcolonial futures as communist and therefore traitorous. The Soviet invasion catalysed this fatal shift. Where the state had once repressed the borderlands' left and separatist movements, it now partnered with Washington and Riyadh to sponsor a religiously charged guerrilla army, decisively crushing one form of insurgency by unleashing another.

On the other hand, the very terrains engineered for world enforcing were also historic spaces of persistent counter-hegemony. Societies across the borderlands had for over a century constrained the ambitions of three empires: British, Soviet, and American. Borderland zones were *central* to anti-colonial resistance, postcolonial security projects, and Cold War strategy, reconfiguring the map of the region and supercharging networks of logistics, trade, and war. Unlike the centralised national liberation fronts of Vietnam or Algeria, this resistance was fragmented, often emerging from conservative tribal structures rather than secular vanguard parties. Yet, the absence of hegemonic anti-colonial movements did not diminish the world-historic impacts of the borderlands. The tension between the state's world enforcing and society's diffuse resistance is the enduring legacy of imperial-anti-imperial relationism – a contradiction that outlived both the Cold War and the decline of socialist internationalism, continually animating asymmetrical conflict during the War on Terror.

It is from this dialectic that Pakistan emerges as a pivotal paradox, a postcolonial garrison state projecting power through extraterritorial proxies, yet simultaneously a volatile nexus where elite security interests, anti-colonial solidarity and transnational Islamism, chaotically converged. Pakistani state and non-state factions became pivotal yet paradoxical Cold War actors – instrumental in defeating the Soviet Union while simultaneously battling internal and regional upheavals. Socialist, Islamist, separatist, and anti-imperial movements exposed the fractures within Pakistan's postcolonial state, even as its U.S.-backed military sought to suppress them. The strategy revealed deeper contradictions between a state anxious to assert power in its borderlands, and an assertive foreign policy in Afghanistan. To understand these processes, it is necessary to grasp the unresolved nature of Muslim nationalism in Pakistan – rooted in an idea of Islamic universalism – an idea that the state mobilised even as its very logic unsettled the boundaries of the nation itself.<sup>12</sup> It is also critical to engage with the state's strategic alignment, but also adaption, of Anglo-American imperial interests – a foundational pillar of Pakistan's foreign policy tripod; its post-1955 pro-US orientation, its defence strategies against India, and the cultivation of a 'mosque-military alliance' emerging in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

The enduring colonial legacy of the Durand Line proved central to the region's postcolonial trajectory. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border dispute was certainly not a peripheral diplomatic issue but a foundational instrument of statecraft. From the 1950s onward, governments in Islamabad and Kabul deliberately cultivated and internationalised the conflict to perform and consolidate their fragile sovereignty. By mobilising nationalist sentiment against an external 'other', each state sought to override profound internal fragmentation – for Pakistan, the chasm between East and West Pakistan, competing elites, and political strife, and for Afghanistan, the perennial tensions between a modernising central authority and tribal power. This strategy of externalisation provided the rationale for centralising power within a militarised state apparatus and, crucially, for forging decisive superpower alliances. Pakistan, in particular, successfully framed itself as a bulwark against Soviet-backed Afghan irredentism, thereby securing its place within the U.S.-led security architecture. This re-established an age-old colonial pattern in which a great power relies on local partners to manage a volatile frontier, a template that would be perfected during the Afghan-Soviet War.

The war stands as the central act in a recurring tragedy of empire, bookended by the British Raj's invasions (1839–1919) and America's twenty year occupation (2001–2021). It is during the Afghan war in which religious war becomes enshrined as a pillar of U.S.-led anti-communism.

<sup>12</sup>Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup>Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005).

The U.S.-led global anti-communist counter-insurgency would not have been successful in creating the conditions for Soviet withdrawal and defeat had it not been for the transboundary resistance along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Pakistan-Afghanistan theatre formed the most consequential site of military struggle in the late Cold War, shifting power decisively in favour of the U.S., and contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Three logics conditioned Pakistan's encounter with the Afghan-Soviet War: the military's growing power and deepening ties to Washington and Riyadh, the insurgent resistance of the Afghans, and the worldwide outrage and pressure over Soviet war crimes. Together, they defined a critical juncture where the unfinished project of decolonisation enmeshed with the geopolitics of the late Cold War.

The Afghan war showcased the political decay, military overstretching, and the crippling economic stagnation of the Soviet Union. While U.S. and Pakistani counter-insurgency networks were pivotal in militarising the Afghan resistance, their geopolitical 'success' in hastening the Soviet withdrawal must be understood within a wider constellation of structural crises. The Soviet Union's chronic economic stagnation, the resurgence of nationalist movements across Eastern Europe, the unintended consequences of Gorbachev's reforms, and the ideological exhaustion of the Soviet project collectively reshaped the global order. Yet the Afghan-Soviet War undeniably compounded these pressures. The conflict sped up the late Cold War, it amplified discontent in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Central Asian provinces, and it drained Soviet resources, tarnishing the military's prestige, and deepening both the economic crisis and the erosion of state credibility. This history is often narrated through a triumphalist, U.S.-centred perspective<sup>16</sup> in which U.S. strategy is cast as the decisive cause of Soviet collapse and America's Cold War's 'victory'. In contrast, this article challenges that teleology by foregrounding the agency of Afghans and Pakistanis in the attrition of Soviet military power, while aligning with revisionist scholarship that situates the USSR's disintegration primarily in its internal economic contradictions and political fragilities.<sup>17</sup>

Pakistan's entanglement in Afghanistan's conflicts collapses the foundational binaries of twentieth-century historiography: coloniser/colonised, superpower/lesser power, West/East. Far from a peripheral episode, these contests radiated globally, recalibrating intervention, redefining resistance, and forcing a reckoning with the very nature of postcolonial sovereignty and transnational militarism. Yet our theoretical tools have yet to catch up with histories of war and internationalism 'from below'. In conventional histories and theories of world politics, decolonisation marks the end of empire and the linear rise of sovereign nations under the principle of self-determination. By contrast in the context of anti-colonial liberation struggles, their internationalist world-making projects imagined not only self-determination, but an egalitarian and domination-free international order.<sup>18</sup> Despite the inability of these radical international visions to be realised, the world-historic struggles for global decolonisation ended four centuries of colonial rule.

Yet great power conflict takes precedence in IR (international relations), whilst decolonisation is relegated to a secondary position behind the World Wars and the Cold War, even as it redefined the twentieth century and fused with longer global imperial histories.<sup>19</sup> The afterlives of the fractured terrain left by empire shaped the course and conduct of the Cold War, which itself became fused with struggles for decolonisation.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the Cold War is treated here not merely as a historical *event* defined by superpower rivalry, but as an *era* of global transformation in which the

<sup>14</sup>Devji, *Muslim Zion*.

<sup>15</sup>Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, 'The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union', *Review of International Studies*, 25:4 (1999), pp. 693–708.

<sup>16</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup>Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>18</sup>Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, pp. 1–8.

<sup>19</sup>Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment in security studies', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 329–52.

<sup>20</sup>Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake (eds), *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

projects for global decolonisation collided with imperial reconstruction in an age of ‘neocolonialism’. This approach aligns with revisionist historiographies that identify the Cold War’s meaning not only in bipolar confrontation, but also the struggles over nationhood, development, and liberation in the Global South.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the article contributes to scholarship on modern power politics in international politics,<sup>22</sup> postcolonial IR,<sup>23</sup> Cold War history, and recent efforts to theorise international politics from the Global South.<sup>24</sup> It intervenes in key debates in IR theory – particularly in critical world order studies,<sup>25</sup> debates on imperial modernity,<sup>26</sup> and historical sociology<sup>27</sup> – by foregrounding how South-South encounters, and substate political formations in the global South, served as laboratories for alternative world-making projects.

Eurocentric historical accounts of post-1945 Cold War world order are dominant, epitomised by the enduring influence of Gaddis’s notion of the Cold War as a ‘long peace’ in Europe.<sup>28</sup> Yet if we ‘provincialise’ the Eurocentrism of accounts of superpower rivalry, we enable a supporting cast of states and movements of the global majority to punctuate our histories and theories.<sup>29</sup> There has been a recent turn in global history and critical IR that takes seriously the rest of the world and its conflicts and imperial histories, examining the intersection of Cold War and global events in China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Algeria, Cuba, and Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> This growing body of scholarship has productively interrogated the entanglement of the Cold War and North-South conflict. Yet the strategic marginalisation of the Third World by the superpowers is often unwittingly reproduced by a historiography that remains centred on great powers and nation-state elites, thereby reinforcing the erasure of postcolonial societies, and reinforcing foundational narratives of the Cold War and modern international order.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, situating Pakistani actors – state and non-state alike – within a transboundary framework, allows one to rethink the Cold War not simply as bipolar confrontation and interstate geopolitics, but also as a field of multipolar, multi-scaled contestation, shaped by the ambitions and geopolitical strategy of the Global South. In this schema, decolonisation reaches the level of importance we usually reserve for great power rivalries and world wars. In freeing ‘our understanding of Cold War history from the centrality of Europe’s imaginary ... we need to think of this

<sup>21</sup>Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup>Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup>Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction* (Polity Press, 2021).

<sup>24</sup>Pinar Bilgin, ‘The Global South as a source of theory: Promise and pitfalls’, *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016), pp. 134–46.

<sup>25</sup>Richard Falk, *The Declining World Order: America’s Imperial Geopolitics* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>26</sup>Robbie Shilliam (ed), *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* (Routledge, 2011); Siba N. Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup>Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies* (Bloomsbury, 2014); Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

<sup>28</sup>John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>29</sup>Roger E. Kanet, ‘The superpower quest for empire: The Cold War and Soviet support for “Wars of National Liberation”’, *Cold War History*, 6:3 (2006), pp. 331–52; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Jeremy Scott Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup>Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell (eds), *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Bruce Cumings, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations* (Duke University Press, 2002); Jason Parker, ‘Cold War II: The Eisenhower administration, the Bandung Conference, and the reperiodization of the post-war era’, *Diplomatic History*, 30:5 (2006), pp. 867–92; Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1999); Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Jutta Weldes (ed), *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup>Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

history as a genuinely global history' maintains Heonik Kwon.<sup>32</sup> The article is explicitly working here within the strain of arguments made in the literature which ultimately subsume Cold War studies within a study of the colonial encounter.<sup>33</sup> This perspective asserts that the Cold War was an extension of imperial struggle involving histories of interimperial rivalry, North-South as well as South-South conflicts, and mobilisations. The test, Kwon argues, is the 'great challenge facing any effort to write an international history of the Cold War ... discerning the precise, subtle, and intricate connections between the Cold War ... and the course of decolonisation.'<sup>34</sup> The job left to theorists is thus to better theorise the global processes through which decolonisation shaped Cold War geopolitics.<sup>35</sup> It means recentring our focus on the history and sociology of transboundary encounters in the forging of networks, strategy, and war-making.<sup>36</sup> A relational rather than a unitary state ontology helps to avoid the pitfalls of methodological nationalism and state-centrism that dominates analysis in international relations.<sup>37</sup> The fetishisation of the state in IR has meant that IR remains ill-equipped for understanding transboundary encounters and historical change. Reflecting on Pakistani encounters during the Afghan war requires us to renounce ontological territoriality and focus attention on changing relationships within theatres of interaction populated by states, social forces, and world orders, in relation to underlying and changing historical processes.<sup>38</sup>

The conventional IR and international history scholarship on the Afghan war emphasises the bipolar dimensions of the conflict, including the reasons behind U.S. involvement and Soviet withdrawal.<sup>39</sup> The role and importance of the Afghans and Pakistanis is secondary to these concerns and is largely understood through the prism of irregular warfare.<sup>40</sup> When Pakistan's role is studied, scholarly accounts largely offer chronological depictions of the major historical events, emphasising the role of the Zia's regime and the military apparatus.<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere, there have been important historical interventions stressing the importance of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border disputes, the effectiveness of the Afghan Mujahedeen, and the failure of the revolutionary left in the two decades leading up to the war.<sup>42</sup> Fortunately, contemporary scholars are retrieving the underexamined histories of anti-colonial movements, examining their periodicals and detailing the failures of the postcolonial state.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Kwon, *The Other Cold War*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup>Alina Sajed and Begüm Adalet, 'Introduction: Toward a radical international thought', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 123:3 (2024), pp. 431–39.

<sup>34</sup>Kwon, *The Other Cold War*, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup>Parker, 'Cold War II', p. 867; James and Leake, *Decolonization and the Cold War*.

<sup>36</sup>Tarak Barkawi and George Lawson, 'International origins of social and political theory', in Tarak Barkawi and George Lawson (eds), *International Origins of Social and Political Theory* (Emerald Publishing, 2017), pp. 1–7; Julian Go, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 159.

<sup>37</sup>Justin Rosenberg, 'International relations in the prison of political science', *International Relations*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 127–53; Justin Rosenberg, 'Why is there no international historical sociology?' *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 307–40.

<sup>38</sup>John Gerrard Ruggie, 'Territoriality and beyond: Problematizing modernity in international relations', *International Organization*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 139–74; Robert W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond international relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

<sup>39</sup>Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press, 2011); Richard Ned Lebow, 'The rise and fall of the Cold War in comparative perspective', *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (1999), pp. 21–39; Odd Arne Westad, 'Afghanistan: Perspectives on the Soviet War', *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 20:3 (1989), pp. 281–93.

<sup>40</sup>Ivan M. Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup>Maleeha Lodhi (ed), *Pakistan: Beyond the 'Crisis State'* (Hurst, 2011); Eqbal Ahmad, *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad*, eds. Carollee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo, and Yogesh Chandrani (Oxford University Press, 2006); Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (Public Affairs, 2011).

<sup>42</sup>Fred Halliday, 'The war and revolution in Afghanistan', *New Left Review*, 1/119 (1980), pp. 20–41; Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>43</sup>Kamran Asdar Ali, *Communism in Pakistan: Politics and Class Activism 1947–1972* (I. B. Tauris, 2015).

Challenging the depiction of the Cold War as an epochal divide, this article recentres colonial and anti-colonial encounters and their legacies as enduring crucibles of world order. This analysis necessitates a break from IR's methodological nationalism, advancing instead a transboundary framework that centres Southern theatres, states, and societies in co-constitutive relations with global 'others', in the same analytical frame.<sup>44</sup> Through this method, we can deduce how powers in the periphery hold positional power, and where and when particular groups are able to effect global transformations through interactions in international networks.<sup>45</sup> This means we document 'imperialist internationalism, on the one hand, and projects of alternative worldmaking ... on the other'.<sup>46</sup> It is then possible to disentangle the networks and processes that forged globalisation and assess to what degree postcolonial theatres shaped global imperial entanglements, and to what extent they shaped subsequent eras of global struggle. Whilst scholarship at the intersection of IR and anti-colonial theory has begun to marshal a promising route for radical international thought, it has tended to focus solely on elite projects and thinkers. The process of unpicking both the positionality of anti-colonial movements in international geopolitical struggles, and their effects in shaping global orders, allows for a clearer picture of dynamics of historical change, thereby improving the emergent canon on anti-colonial politics in IR, in relation to issues it has so far underexplored, namely geopolitics, guerilla struggle, and war.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, this article advances post-Eurocentric, anti-colonial security studies by centring the perspectives of those who successfully resisted superpower intervention yet remain marginalised in IR.<sup>48</sup> By retheorising Pakistan's Cold War, we recover the internal contests over the meaning and international identity of Pakistan itself. Moving beyond a focus on American patronage, this framework situates Pakistani societal dynamics within a broader constellation of Global South, Asian, and Muslim political, military, and intellectual currents, revealing a more complex history of the period.<sup>49</sup>

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first situates Pakistan's role in the Afghan Soviet War within a broader context of global transformations in Asia. The second, drawing on archival materials, explores Pakistan's borderlands as sites of alternative world-making through borderlands resistance, while the third examines the geopolitical projects of the Pakistani military and intelligence agency (the ISI) and its alliance with the CIA. The fourth analyses Pakistani encounters in the Afghan war as a historical event in the history of decolonisation and the Cold War. The conclusion draws these strands together to argue for a reconceptualisation of world order through the lens of *Pakistani conflictual world-making*.

## Global transformations in Asia during the late Cold War

The late Cold War was not merely orchestrated in Washington and Moscow but forged in the battlefields and urban revolutions of the Global South. For Pakistan, the 1970s was a decade of existential redefinition, the fragmenting of anti-imperial socialist politics and the rise of the state's unison with the religious right and its growing alliance with the Gulf states was bookended by the searing trauma of its 1971 fragmentation and the regional revolutions in Iran and Afghanistan that closed the decade. They compelled Pakistan's military junta to pursue a new, interventionist destiny: leveraging a burgeoning alliance with both Gulf petrodollars and U.S. power to project a hardened,

<sup>44</sup> Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (University of California Press, 1997); Mahmood Mamdani, 'Good muslim, bad muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism', *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (2002), pp. 766–75.

<sup>45</sup> Christof Dejung and David Motadel, 'Global social history: Rethinking class and social transformation in the modern world', *The Historical Journal*, 67:4 (2024), pp. 611–33.

<sup>46</sup> Sajed and Adalet, 'Introduction', p. 432.

<sup>47</sup> Sajed and Adalet, 'Introduction', p. 435.

<sup>48</sup> Barkawi and Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment'.

<sup>49</sup> Salman Sayyid, 'The meaning of Pakistan', *Critical Muslim Studies*, 2017; Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them beyond Orientalism* (Hurst, 2011).

Islamic militarism in the face of Soviet expansionism, and to manage the profound insecurities it felt at home. Here, the article examines these four world-historical events 'from below' to reveal how South-South entanglements, rather than superpower diktat, critically shaped the trajectory of the Afghan–Soviet War and Pakistan's decisive role within it.

First, the fragmentation of Pakistan in 1971 stands as a pivotal chapter in the nation's history, a moment where the unfinished project of decolonisation collided with the *realpolitik* of Cold War geopolitics. The 1971 war with India and the Bangladeshi liberation struggle reconfigured the Pakistani state, transforming Pakistan's territory and historical geography. Pakistan's brutal counter-insurgency failed, led to the trauma of a second partition, and caused unimaginable devastation and suffering in the former Eastern wing. Yet it also allowed the ruling elite to centralise its power structures in formerly 'West' Pakistan, solidifying its identity as a militarised fortress, and strengthening its alliances with both Washington and Beijing. It would also utilise a new intervention which later shaped the Afghan–Soviet War: deploying Jamat-I-Islami Islamist activists as paramilitaries, operating in conjunction with the military in the killing fields of Bangladesh. Furthermore, the deepening Sino-Soviet split also fragmented the Pakistani left into pro-Peking and pro-Moscow factions. The fall of the Eastern wing deepened the opposition's frailties, enabling greater state control in the reconstituted 'One Unit' of West Pakistan.<sup>50</sup> In its attempts at suppressing Bengali self-determination and escaping international pressure, Pakistan's U.S. and Chinese-backed elites laid bare the inherent tensions between the deployment of anti-colonial discourses by state elites, and the ruthless realities of postcolonial statecraft. After the war with India, the subsequent political crisis rehabilitated the military, allowing Pakistan's foreign policy transition from pan-Asianist idealism to a hardened, Islamic-inflected militarism, with close ties to American Cold War objectives and re-energised by Gulf petrodollars. As Gary Bass illustrates, the war highlighted how superpower realignments could exacerbate and animate regional fractures.<sup>51</sup> The 1971 war was a catalytic event that recast the Pakistani state. The trauma of dismemberment bred a security paradigm defined by militarisation and Islamisation, creating an elite determined to compensate for the loss in the East by establishing dominance in Afghanistan, thus setting the course for its future international role.

Second, economic transformations in the Middle East during the early to mid 1970s awakened the financial power of the Gulf monarchies. The 1973–1974 oil embargo by Arab petroleum producing states marshalled the new financial muscle of Gulf monarchies. U.S. inflation, the global 1973–1975 recession, and the reversal of post-1945 economic investment led to unemployment and inflation worldwide. These global economic shifts led to the decline of industrial and manufacturing sectors in the West, the transfer of capital to financial institutions, the growth of global financial regimes on postcolonial states, and impacted the decline of anti-colonial nationalism and pan-Arabism following the 1973 Arab–Israeli War. In the Middle East, OPEC member states were earning significantly more capital from oil exportation than state administrators could effectively deploy in domestic infrastructure. The result was massive spending on development projects and the sponsoring of Islamist charities, madrassas, and aligned militant movements.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the financial surpluses of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in tandem with U.S. dollars, provided an essential economic lifeline, enabling Pakistan to transform itself into the logistical and ideological hub for resistance against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan.

Third, the 1978–1979 Iranian Revolution toppled the U.S.-backed Shah's regime and spread a revolutionary form of pan-Islamic power intimately tied to Third World revolution. Its decentralised beginnings quickly shifted with the rise to power of a theocratic government, the world

<sup>50</sup>Noaman G. Ali, 'From the barrel of a gun: Maoist debates in Pakistan', *Jamhoor*, 2022.

<sup>51</sup>Gary Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (Knopf, 2013).

<sup>52</sup>A. Z. Hilali, *US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (Ashgate, 2005).

historic leadership of Khomeini, and the growth of Iran's Islamic Republic, whose radical internationalism stood in contrast to the sclerotic regimes of the Arab world.<sup>53</sup> The rise of Iranian anti-colonialism following the long decline of Pan-Arabism, ignited the Arab street, alarming the U.S.-backed Arab regimes and Sunni monarchies into sponsoring Sunni militant networks as a bulwark against Iran, starting with the arming and training of the Mujahideen and the internationalisation of the 'Global Jihad' in Afghanistan. The Shia-led, anti-imperial revolution in Iran was similarly viewed as an ideological threat to Pakistan's Sunni-majority state, whose own fiercely conservative brand of Deobandi and Salafi inspired Islam favoured accommodation with empire. In response, Islamabad strategically amplified its support for Sunni internationalist militancy in Afghanistan, not only to fight the Soviet-backed communists but also to build a sectarian bulwark against Iran's revolutionary politics, suppress its marginalised Shia communities, and secure its legitimacy with the Gulf monarchies.

Fourth, the final trigger was the Saur Revolution of 1978, which proved the catalyst for global conflagration. The Marxist-Leninist PDPA's (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) rise to power, following a military coup against Mohammad Daoud's one-party state in 1978, triggered the outbreak of civil war: its brutal, unpopular reforms sparked a decentralised, grass-roots insurgency that threatened to topple the new regime. The potential collapse of its Afghan client compelled the Soviet Union to intervene directly in 1979, partly to prevent an Islamist revolution from destabilising its own Central Asian frontier. The rising violence intensified Islamabad's preparations for counter-insurgency and incentivised it into strategic alignment with the religious right, in a pact to prevent both the spread of Communism and the likelihood of Pashtun borderland rebellions.<sup>54</sup> The alliance was built around the Jamat-I-Islami, Pakistan's largest Islamist party, the Jamat acting as an intermediary between the state and militant groups. The Saur revolution thus intensified the urgency of this coalition, the Jamat-e-Islami emerging with state backing as a vital channel, funnelling the state's power through religious, student, business, and militant networks.<sup>55</sup>

This sequence of upheavals – the fragmentation of Pakistan, the oil-financed ascendance of the Gulf, Iran's Islamic Revolution, and Afghanistan's Saur Revolution – collectively dismantled the postcolonial status quo, compelling Islamabad and Washington to socially reengineer the borderlands following the Soviet invasion. The analysis now pivots to the borderlands of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan investigating the anti-imperial politics that flourished there in the two decades before the Afghan–Soviet War. Interrogating revolutionary periodicals reveals the periphery as a primary theatre of *conflictual world-making*. In response, the Pakistani state, in unison with the religious right, sought to transform the very social fabric of the borderlands into a militarised frontier. This internal counter-insurgency was the indispensable condition for its external proxy war, a dual-front campaign unified by the doctrine of global anti-communism.

### Once upon a time the mountains were red

Cold War geopolitics offered a double-edged sword for postcolonial elites. Pakistani and Afghan leaders played off competing U.S. and Soviet projects for the chance to build roads, dams, railways, government infrastructure, and provide the cement, weapons, data, expertise, and arms to create new states in the image of technocratic modernity. Yet deepening these alliances also allowed superpowers direct access to the levers of power in both societies. Nunan describes this process in Afghanistan as a laboratory conditioning the very futurity of the postcolonial nation-state.<sup>56</sup> The same is true in Pakistan, where superpower clientelism and the longue durée of Anglo-American influence conditioned modernisation and development, in ways which largely worked to entrench

<sup>53</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (Viking, 2008); Ali Rahman, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (Zed Books, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan* (Hurst, 2014).

<sup>55</sup> Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*.

patronage politics, foreign accumulation, and the intensity of uneven development.<sup>57</sup> Yet from the end of British rule onward, Pashtun political mobilisations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province) advocated greater autonomy, socialist federations, and even independence. They included secular, anti-imperial, political groups such as the partition era Khudai Khidmatgars, the socialist party politics of the National Awami Party (NAP), as well as Maoist political factions.<sup>58</sup>

Recent scholarship has emphasised how Pakistan's peripheries were not passive spaces but active sites of political imagination that challenged both the state's developmentalism and the global Cold War order. Mahvish Ahmad's ethnography of revolutionary parties demonstrates how these movements reworked the language of rights, revolution, and radical world politics within the constraints of postcolonial counter-insurgency.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Noaman G. Ali and Shozab Raza's work reveals how anti-colonial politics in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa articulated projects grounded in socialist and anti-imperial solidarities.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar illustrates how these struggles illuminate how the structure of power in Pakistan was shaped by ruling elite's control over political economy, linking internal class hierarchies and struggle to international alignments.<sup>61</sup> Taken together, these perspectives substantiate the article's argument that Pakistan's world-making was at once *conflictual* and *generative* precisely because it emerged from the tension between peripheral insurgency and the global strategic co-optation of the borderlands.

The political trajectories of the Mazdoor Kissan Party and the Baluchistan Liberation Front cannot be fully understood without situating them within the contested borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Persistent ethnic tensions, rooted in the marginalisation of minorities, intersected with rival postcolonial state-building projects that sought to consolidate authority through territorialisation and strict border demarcation. These efforts often exacerbated local grievances, as claims over territory and political representation were subordinated to the imperatives of state elites. Cold War geopolitics further complicated these dynamics as Soviet-supported Afghanistan and U.S.-backed Pakistan vied for supremacy over the borderlands. The strategic interests of super-powers frequently reinforced state-centric visions of sovereignty, supplying resources to regimes that prioritised territorial control over ethnic accommodation. Within this matrix of postcolonial governance and external intervention, borderlands movements emerged deeply entangled in global politics, as evidenced by their internationalist responses to the overlapping pressures of border policing, class war, and imperial power.<sup>62</sup>

The Mazdoor Kissan Party (MKP) exemplifies how postcolonial actors in the Pakistani borderlands attempted to enact alternative world-making projects, in direct opposition to the state. This vision was rooted in agrarian class politics, internationalist solidarity, and radical critiques of uneven development – making the MKP not merely a domestic political actor but a node in transnational anti-imperialism. The MKP emerged as the result of the 1960 Sino-Soviet split of the NAP, and the fragmentation on the Communist International. Inspired by Cuban, Vietnamese, and Chinese liberation movements, the MKP prescribed to an anti-imperial Cold War politics.<sup>63</sup> Their ideas, practices, and institutions did not conform to the established rubrics of counter-hegemonic politics in Pakistan. Unlike the urban workers and intellectuals of the Communist Party, the MKP

<sup>57</sup> Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Politics of 'Common Sense': State, Society and Culture in Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the Northwest Frontier* (James Currey, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Mahvish Ahmad, 'Movement texts as anti-colonial theory', *Sociology*, 57:1 (2022), pp. 54–71.

<sup>60</sup> Noaman G. Ali and Fawad Ahmad, 'Worldly Marxism: Rethinking revolution from Pakistan's peripheries', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 42:2 (2022), pp. 489–504.

<sup>61</sup> Akhtar, *The Politics of 'Common Sense'*.

<sup>62</sup> Siddique, *The Pashtun Question*; Leake, *The Defiant Border*; Magnus Marsden and Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Ishtiaq Ahmed, 'The rise and fall of the left and the Maoist movements in Pakistan', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 66:3 (2010), pp. 251–65.

were an explicitly grass-roots peasant movement that prioritised land reclamation, collective ownership, and local militancy in the face of state-backed landlords and their militias.<sup>64</sup> The MKP focused on organising, education, and resistance in the borderlands, and sought to link their politics with global movements for liberation. From the 1960s into the mid 1970s, the MKP garnered a sizeable level of popular support in NWFP, 'out of proportion to its political strength in the overall balance of power'.<sup>65</sup> This was partly sustained because of changes in Pakistani foreign policy from the 1960s onwards, as Pakistan-China relations warmed significantly, and Pakistan-China infrastructure projects blossomed. The MKP contested power amid a weakened historic bloc during a period in which the Pakistani establishment faced a period of reconstitution and realignment following war with India in 1971 and the loss of East Pakistan. In this context, radical parties and movements in NWFP were tolerated for a while by the state to appease China, and partly as a way to influence Pashtun communities away from ethno-separatism.

Maoist borderland politics flourished in the late 1960s in Pakistan as is evidenced by revolutionary movement journals. The *MKP Circular* was a periodical that acted as the mouthpiece for the Dehaat Mazdoor Tanzeem (the Agriculture Worker's Movement), a branch of the party that handled peasants' rights. It recounts the history of the peasant and worker's movement: 'four thousand years is a very long time ... the ages of tribalism, slavery, feudalism; the age of capitalism ... today, humanity is living in the age of modern tribalism ... we, the historical owners of the land are living as immigrants on our own lands to this day'.<sup>66</sup> The *MKP Circular* emphasised a history of indigeneity and displacement, in stark contrast to the elite conception of Muslim Nationalism at the heart of Pakistani state identity. Groups such as the MKP and their journals, offer a window into a period in history in which socialist movements traversed the frontier, espousing collective ownership and anti-imperial internationalism. The ideological formation of the MKP was not a monolithic adoption of Maoism but part of a contentious yet vibrant internal debate within the Pakistani left. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed fierce debates among socialist groups over the very character of the Pakistani state and the path to revolution.<sup>67</sup> The state's eventual crackdown on the MKP was a targeted suppression of a specific, potent strand of revolutionary praxis that directly threatened the feudal and military architecture of the state's power in the periphery.

Centring the *MKP Circular* is not merely an archival recovery of a silenced history, but an intervention that treats the text itself as a site of anti-colonial world-making. Hence, the newspapers and pamphlets of anti-colonial movements are 'active, world-making texts' that express a political theory from the margins.<sup>68</sup> Their goal was to create a new collective subject, one rooted in an alternative historical consciousness and political imagination.<sup>69</sup> The articulation of Maoist struggle, pan-Islamic solidarity, and global decolonisation was not unique to Pakistan but resonated across broader Third Worldist formations that sought to reconcile modernist developmentalism, religious universalism, and socialist internationalism.<sup>70</sup> Situating Pakistan within this transnational intellectual and political field, the article aligns with scholarship that interprets Muslim internationalism as a distinctly modern phenomenon,<sup>71</sup> separate to the rise of Islamism and Jihadism, and emerging from the contradictions of empire, the interstate system, and decolonisation rather than as a vestigial remnant of a premodern order, as Orientalist narratives have long presumed. Thus, by analysing their texts, we move beyond seeing the MKP as a failed, provincial entity and instead

<sup>64</sup>Nadeem Paracha, 'When the mountains were red', *Dawn* (24 February 2013).

<sup>65</sup>Ahmed, 'The rise and fall', p. 251.

<sup>66</sup>*Mazdoor Kissan Party Circular* (13 November 1974), 'The Constitution of the Dehati Mazdoor Tanzeem', trans. Sara Kazmi, Revolutionary Papers.

<sup>67</sup>Noaman G. Ali, 'From the barrel of a gun? Maoist debates in Pakistan', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 46:1 (2023), pp. 82–101.

<sup>68</sup>Mahvish Ahmad, 'Movement text as anticolonial theory', *Critical Asian Studies*, 55:2 (2023), pp. 265–85.

<sup>69</sup>Ahmad, 'Movement text', p. 265.

<sup>70</sup>John T. Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

<sup>71</sup>Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

recognise it as a node in a transboundary network of anti-colonial politics, producing an insurgent lexicon that challenged both the postcolonial state and the Eurocentric confines of the Cold War.<sup>72</sup> This approach takes seriously the theoretical and ideological labour of borderland actors, understanding their publications as engines for world-making projects.

Similarly, the BPLF (Baluchistan People's Liberation Front) functioned as an instrument of alternative imagination – articulating Baluchi identity and resistance, anti-imperial solidarity, and liberation. Founded in 1964, the BPLF were committed to the Baloch people's struggle for self-determination. They espoused a combination of Marxist-Leninism and anti-colonial separatism, advocating militant action in the face of state repression. *Jabal* (meaning mountain in Balochi) was a revolutionary periodical born out of the resistance movement to state operations in Baluchistan, the largest, most sparse region of Pakistan, blessed with natural resources, yet the least economically developed and integrated province. In two essays written in 1977, *Jabal*'s writers theorised the links between empire, capitalism, and the state. Baluchistan was observed as a site of extraction as well as for the trialling of new weapons technologies, tactics, and forms of torture.<sup>73</sup> The unnamed writers stress the links between empire and the state, hence, 'without imperialism's direct and indirect assistance it is difficult to imagine the continued existence of the essentially neo-colonial state of Pakistan in its present condition. Imperialism and the oligarchy are united on the issue of maintaining the most backward and reactionary social structures, maintaining the centuries old rule of the landlords over the peasantry, and oppressing the minority nationalities.'<sup>74</sup> *Jabal* emphasised forced disappearances, resistance operations, and celebrated Baluchi culture, but it also sought to offer histories and theories of world order struggles. Perhaps most striking is the call for internationalist aid, in line with what potential clients can muster: 'we don't want tanks, we don't want aeroplanes ... we are inspired by the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people that triumphed in the face of more stupendous odds. We are inspired by the great struggle of the Palestinians ... we are fully aware that our friends have their own considerations and limitations ... our needs are simple.'<sup>75</sup> The BPLF embodied a radical alternative to Pakistan's emerging Cold War alignment. Where the state enforced a U.S.-backed imperial order, the BPLF waged a world-making project of socialist, anti-imperial liberation from the periphery.

The BPLF was engaged in an intellectual project to articulate a vision of Baloch identity that was intrinsically anti-colonial and internationalist, to re-educate its audience about the true nature of their oppression. Their struggle was not simply an ethnic separatist project in a narrow sense, but a position that viewed Baloch liberation as a hammer against the triple forces of postcolonial state, feudalism, and international capital. The internationalism of the BPLF was 'provincially rooted but globally connected.'<sup>76</sup> *Jabal*'s call for solidarity was a conscious positioning of the Baloch struggle within an international geography of resistance for the purposes of mobilisation and international coordination. Anti-colonial factions along the borderlands were acutely aware of their place in the geopolitics of the wider world. These traditions 'provide resources for rethinking internationalism' by illuminating how opposition factions theorised their condition in irreducibly global terms, challenging the core-periphery logics of the postcolonial state.<sup>77</sup> The eventual suppression of the BPLF in 1973 to 1974, coordinated between the U.S.-backed regimes in Islamabad and the Shah's regime in Tehran, was the violent triumph of an elite Cold War 'world-enforcing' order over popular struggles for a 'world-making' alternative.

Yet such was the popularity of the subversive material in *Jabal*, that its dissemination carried with it a death sentence for distributors and publishers. It conveyed an internationalist orientalism, which sought to reorient Pakistani world-making away from the bipolar Cold War narrative

<sup>72</sup> Ahmad, 'Movement text', p. 270.

<sup>73</sup> *Jabal*, 1:7 (July 1977).

<sup>74</sup> *Jabal*, 1:3 (February 1977).

<sup>75</sup> *Jabal* (1976), 'The people's armed struggle in Baluchistan: A short review with a special emphasis on the future.'

<sup>76</sup> Noaman G. Ali and Shozab Raza, 'Worldly Marxism: A Pakistani iteration', *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 29:1 (2023), pp. 157–78.

<sup>77</sup> Ali and Raza, 'Worldly Marxism', p. 178.

and towards anti-colonial solidarity, whilst committing to struggle with the postcolonial state. In the second half of the 1970s, worldwide anti-colonial and socialist revolutionary movements faced increased divides and U.S.-backed counter-revolutions.<sup>78</sup> Revolutionary left groups would be squeezed by Pakistan's and Afghanistan's irredentist claims and commitment to state militarism in their peripheries. The stage was set for the marriage of Pakistani nationalism with conservative Islamist forces in alliance with Zia's military regime. Zia came to power in 1978, hanged former president Bhutto, and instituted martial law. But the junta continued what its predecessor, the Bhutto regime, had started; to smash left, separatist, and anti-colonial solidarity, but with increasing U.S. support in the context of heightened conflict in Afghanistan.

Taken together, the *MKP Circular's* invocation of Vietnamese and Palestinian struggles, and *Jabal's* explicit theorisation of the links between 'imperialism and the oligarchy' demonstrate a conscious positioning within global, not merely national, fields of struggle. Thus, the borderlands were central sites for both the production of covert warfare and social engineering, but also for mobilising the peripheries and producing critical theories of global order.<sup>79</sup> The triumph of the state-religious right alliance and the suppression of anti-imperial projects marked the foreclosure of a particular form of emancipatory, internationalist politics that linked the fate of borderland communities directly to the wider currents of socialist internationalism and global decolonisation.

Analysing this terrain reveals how non-state borderland actors shaped global solidarities in ways that disrupted both U.S. and Pakistani Cold War security plans. The appeal of groups like the MKP and the BPLF helped to create a vibrant, anti-colonial field in both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan and all along the borderlands, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the secular anti-colonial group, the Khudai Khitmatgars, had done in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet by the mid 1970s onwards the state's unison with religious militants and feudal elites led to their decline. Following the Soviet invasion, the proliferation of madrassas, operational centres, and logistics hubs further altered the borderlands. Pakistan's military transformed the frontier into a logistical springboard for the Afghan Mujahideen, providing resources and sanctuary to fuel an increasingly religiously inspired insurgency while exploiting factional rivalries to assert control.<sup>80</sup> In repressing the MKP and BPLF, the Pakistani state did not merely purge political rivals; it extinguished an alternative future. This was world-making as a battle for planetary order, where the state enlisted as a lieutenant for empire in order to eradicate the threat of socialist internationalism. In the following section, the analysis of borderland struggles and conflictual world-making is extended to Pakistan-U.S. coordination in Operation Cyclone, the largest covert counter-insurgency in history.

### The ISI–CIA-led anti-communist jihad and social transformations in Pakistan

The Pakistan–Afghanistan borderlands were a dynamic theatre for dialectical world-making, where postcolonial state-building and insurgent discontents violently forged each other. These frontiers functioned as social laboratories for a *frontier internationalism*, a transnational arena where ideologies, logistics, combatants, and capital converged. Here, anti-communism and Islamist jihad were not opposing forces but mutually constitutive modalities: each generated, funded, and legitimised the other. The ISI–CIA-led counter-insurgency networks were themselves enmeshed in a volatile ecology of tribal, ethnic, and insurgent mobilisations of varying ideological and strategic alignments. The central paradox is thus one of co-constitution: insurgency and counter-insurgency emerged as twin, entangled expressions of Pakistan's conflictual entry into the late Cold War order – a contradiction exacerbated and intensified by the Soviet invasion.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (Harper, 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Ali and Raza, 'Worldly Marxism', p. 178.

<sup>80</sup> Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-Ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

An unprecedented move in the history of Soviet foreign policy, the 1979 invasion seemingly confirmed long-held fears in the western camp of Soviet expansionism. It shocked the U.S., damaging already deteriorating détente efforts, and deeply alarming the Muslim world, China, and the West. It was born from a desire in Moscow to save its ally and client, the PDPA, and a fear of Islamist inspired revolution spreading from Iran and Afghanistan to the Central Asian provinces of the Soviet Union.<sup>81</sup> Following the invasion, the Afghan Mujahideen launched attacks on both the Soviet occupying forces and the Afghan army. As reports came in across the world of Soviet atrocities, Islamic scholars called for volunteers to join the global Jihad, backed by Gulf funding.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan resurrected the Washington–Islamabad alliance, binding Zia's Pakistan to Reagan's resurgent crusade against communism. From the Afghan frontier to the farthest edges of the Global South, Pakistan stood at the crossroads of empire, revolution, and America's renewed faith in its Cold War destiny. Pakistan received over three billion dollars from the U.S., which came with stronger political backing, increased covert coordination, and prized new F-16 fighter jet planes.<sup>82</sup> The ISI permitted U.S., Saudi, and the wider Western-Gulf alliance to operate covert training and reconnaissance in Pakistan, under the condition that they would have joint operational oversight with Washington. Over the course of the Afghan–Soviet War, the ISI would develop into one of the largest and most powerful intelligence agencies in the world.

A 1982 U.S. Embassy cable read, 'since the Soviet invasion ... we have largely been content to follow Pakistan's lead'.<sup>83</sup> Figures from ISI included Lieutenant Sultan Amir, a renowned military trainer, respected by Mujahideen and CIA officers alike. Nicknamed the 'Colonel Imam', the CIA showed their appreciation for Amir by giving him a trophy encrusted with a part of the Berlin Wall, following the end of the Cold War. On the trophy it read, 'with deepest respect to one who delivered the first blow'.<sup>84</sup> Other key figures included Pakistani Lieutenant Colonel Mahmood Ahmed Ghazi, who offers an account of this period.<sup>85</sup> During his time in the ISI, spanning from 1984 to 1993, Ghazi undertook specialist training along with other ISI officers in America. Later he oversaw training camps where Mujahideen fighters were taught clandestine warfare and the use of U.S.-made surface-to-air missiles, to neutralise Soviet air superiority. In the final estimation, the ISI trained 1164 rebels in the Stinger missile training operation, which yielded 274 successful hits out of 342 fired, a hit percentage rating of 77%.<sup>86</sup> The ISI would administer global funds to the rebels, select their chosen clients, and ostracise factions with close ties to Afghan royalist tribes and Pashtun nationalists. These factions were the strongest advocates of Pashtunistan and were perceived to directly challenge Pakistani sovereignty.

The combination of the guerrilla warfare acumen of the Mujahideen, ISI–CIA coordination and logistical support, and Gulf funding and recruitment, had a vital role in stalling Soviet operations, limiting them to a strategy of consolidating major urban centres and transport routes by 1986. The ability of rebels to severely limit the power of the Afghan Communist state was possible due to the limited nature of state power outside the major cities, the power of the tribal Jirgas, and their influence over local warlords.<sup>87</sup> Pakistani military and intelligence officers were under no illusions as to what was at stake. Ghazi recounts how, 'it was not just a fight for the freedom of Afghanistan, but it was indeed a fight for the survival of Pakistan too ... had the Soviets not been impeded in

<sup>81</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>82</sup> Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947–2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001), p. 256.

<sup>83</sup> Cable, US Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State, 1 June 1983, 'The secretary's visit to Pakistan: Afghanistan', Cold War International History Project Digital Archive.

<sup>84</sup> Mahmood Ahmed Ghazi, *Afghan War and the Stinger Saga: How the Air Battle Was Fought and Won in Afghanistan* (Ahmad Publications, 2013), p. 88.

<sup>85</sup> Ghazi, *Afghan War*, p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> Ghazi, *Afghan War*, p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* (Hurst, 2005); Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Afghanistan then probably by now Pakistan would have become a Soviet vassal state.<sup>88</sup> Drawing on a legacy of counter-insurgency from East Pakistan to Baluchistan, Zia persuaded Washington that Pakistan's military, heir to the British Indian Army, remained a seasoned force in transnational counter-insurgency.

A singular geopolitical anxiety anchored Pakistan's war strategy, securing its borders against the perceived triple threat of India, Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union. Adopting a military doctrine of 'strategic depth', Pakistani generals aimed to develop deterrence capability as well as offensive military capacity against India, thereby circumventing encirclement. In military scholarship, the concept equates to the ways in which commanders pursue a strategy to close the gap with the adversary's military and industrial production. Pakistani generals thought they could both control the Durand Line and Afghan claims to Pashtunistan across the border, while also preparing a counter-offensive to a potential Indian incursion. The strategy was based on the idea that if India unleashed a sudden large-scale invasion of Pakistan's Punjabi heartlands, the military response would require a friendly neighbouring client installed in Afghanistan, to help rally Pakistani forces, offering generals both extra manpower and geographic space from which to counterstrike. Strategic depth reflected the state's anxieties about the Radcliffe Line stemming from tense histories with India. The Durand Line demarcating Pakistan and Afghanistan was subsequently vital to secure.

A fateful convergence of colonial statecraft, Cold War imperatives, and Pakistan's internal power asymmetries militarised the borderlands. This structural nexus found its decisive agent in General Zia-ul-Haq. Capitalising on the military's political rehabilitation after the 1968 popular uprising, Zia orchestrated a profound strategic and ideological realignment after seizing power in a military coup in 1978, steering the state's alignment with Islamist networks and the Afghan rebellion. This mobilisation transformed Pakistani society into a central front of the anti-Soviet jihad, but in doing so, it institutionalised a durable culture of militarism and counter-revolutionary violence. Zia's own worldview was forged both in British Indian army military service, and in the traumas of partition. He 'believed deeply in the colonial-era army's values, traditions and geopolitical mission ... a thoroughly British orientation.'<sup>89</sup> Zia's account of partition is revealing. He describes how 'we were under constant fire. The country was burning until we reached Lahore. Life had become so cheap between Hindu and Muslim ... once in Pakistan ... we were bathed in blood, but at least we were free citizens.'<sup>90</sup> Zia's strategic paradigm emerged from this dual inheritance: the existential memories of partition, which cemented for many in Pakistan, the state's necessity, and the pride in the professional culture of the British Indian Army officer corps, which provided a template for imperial statecraft. These elements coalesced with deep religiosity, into a fervent belief in a divinely ordained, martial role for Pakistan in world politics. Amongst Pakistan's strongest allies, William Casey was director of the CIA, a World War II veteran of the CIA's precursor organisation, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). 'Casey and Zia both emphasized that ... Soviet strategy echoed the colonial era's scrambles among European powers for natural resources, shipping lanes and continental footholds.'<sup>91</sup> Casey was known at CIA headquarters in Langley as a fiery Cold War advocate. During long meetings between Zia and Casey, Zia is said to have found in Casey a kindred spirit, versed in the links between empire and the Cold War, and committed to the moral duty to maintain the old imperial frontier against the Soviets.<sup>92</sup>

Zia's policies encouraged the influx of more Islamist inspired officers, formalised the introduction of religious indoctrination in the military, expanded the construction of madrassas, and deployed military personnel to oversee the development of militant training camps on the

<sup>88</sup> Ghazi, *Afghan War*, p. 92.

<sup>89</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to 10 September 2001* (Penguin Books, 2005), p. 61.

<sup>90</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, *Pakistan: In the Shadow of Jihad and Afghanistan* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

<sup>91</sup> Charles Cogan, 'Partners in time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979', *World Policy Journal*, 10:2 (1993), pp. 73–82.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Michael Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 252.

borderlands. The Anglicised military officer class, soldiers of the British Empire, and Pakistan's early Cold War architects, were gradually outnumbered during the 1970s and 1980s, by a younger generation of Pakistani military officers. This new cadre had grown up in Pakistan rather than the British Raj. Unlike the affluent, established elite who were Muhajirs and Northern Punjabis, this generation was more explicitly religious in character, largely lower middle class, and hailed predominantly from Southern Punjabi and Pashtun backgrounds (with scant representation from Sindhi or Baloch communities). They had different cultural leanings, were more likely to have received training in the Arab Gulf rather than at the British Army's base at Sandhurst, and had a greater propensity towards social conservatism, remaining suspicious of the pro-Western bias and secular leanings of their Anglicised superiors.<sup>93</sup> The Afghan–Soviet War, therefore, did not just change Pakistan's society or foreign policy; it fundamentally reformed the sociological and ideological core of its most powerful institution – the military itself.

In perhaps the most spectacular yet overlooked feature of the Afghan war's covert operations, ISI agents, approved by Casey and Zia, assisted Mujahideen units tasked with the dissemination of CIA-funded Qurans in Uzbekistan, before shifting from propaganda to outright raids into Soviet territory.<sup>94</sup> During the late 1980s, a series of ultra-clandestine operations were carried out by elite Mujahideen units and overseen by ISI officers. In 1987 they crossed the Amu Darya River, and launched commando raids into Central Asia, targeting Soviet industrial and logistical capacity.<sup>95</sup> These operations were quickly downscaled after the Soviets threatened massive reprisals on Pakistan. Nevertheless, these raids had great symbolic importance. Not only did they amount to the first instance of CIA-supported guerrilla warfare in the Soviet Union, but they also marked the expansion of Pakistani covert strategy into the territory of a superpower, signalling a capability usually reserved for first rate military powers. The Soviet threat, both real and imagined, provided Pakistani decision makers with lucrative access to international diplomatic support, arms, and funding. It gave them a risky, yet powerful mobilising tool for recruitment into its regular forces and irregular clients in conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The increased financial largesse of the Pakistani establishment further deepened military power in the state, but also Islamicised politics and society in the process.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, the Afghan war transformed Pakistan into the epicentre of a global counter-insurgency economy, where the state's security apparatus fused with the religious right and transnational militant networks. Its borderlands became conduits linking arms dealers, intelligence agencies, NGOs, traffickers, and traders in a vast logistical web of war, narcotics, and capital. Fuelled by U.S.–Saudi patronage, Zia's deeply unpopular regime deepened repression of progressives, unions, women, and minorities, reconstituting Pakistan's power structure around conservative and religious forces. By the late 1980s, Pakistan stood as a society fractured by rampant inequality, patronage, and the violent fallout of its government's geopolitical ambitions.

Following a long phase of attrition, prolonged UN mediation led to the Afghan Geneva Peace Accords in 1988, agreed by both Washington and Moscow who were both keen to exit the costly, protracted war. Gorbachev envisioned that the deliberation process between the Afghan state and the Mujahideen would end the conflict and stabilise the country.<sup>97</sup> With the fall of Najibullah's government in 1992, the U.S. departed, abandoning Kabul to the warlords. Pakistan's ISI first backed the extremist Hezb-e-Islami but soon pivoted to the Taliban as a more reliable vehicle for its influence. In 1996, the Taliban seized Kabul and the Pakistani security establishment's desire to install a friendly regime in Kabul was achieved, at great future cost.

<sup>93</sup> Ahmad, *The Selected Writings of Iqbal Ahmad*, p. 431.

<sup>94</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 90.

<sup>95</sup> Mohammed Yousuf and Mark Adkin, *The Battle for Afghanistan: The Soviets and the Mujahideen during the 1980s* (Pen & Sword Books, 2007), p. 200.

<sup>96</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (Pluto Press, 2007), p. 170.

<sup>97</sup> Amin Saikal, *The Afghanistan Conflict: A History* (I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 193.

The human, financial, and social cost of the war for Moscow was vast. The Soviets had lost 15,000 men with another 35,000 wounded, with the final retreating soldier killed by a rebel sniper along the Soviet built Salang highway on 15 February 1989.<sup>98</sup> The Afghan–Soviet War delivered the final, fatal blow to Soviet prestige in the Global South, accelerating its disintegration. To reduce the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan to a tale of superpower fatigue is to misunderstand the war's essential nature. It was, rather, a generative nexus, a violent convergence of empire, ideology, logistics and insurgency that forged the contours of our contemporary world disorder. In the penultimate section, the article explores the war's broader theoretical, historical, and international consequences, and the underexamined influence of the Pakistanis.

### Pakistani encounters in the Afghan–Soviet War as an event in histories of the Cold War and decolonisation

The Afghan–Soviet War was a world-historical crucible where the unfinished project of decolonisation erupted into a new and transformative phase. It occupies a paradoxical place in history. While acknowledged as a graveyard of Soviet power and a cradle of global jihad, its significance as a totemic event in the *global counter-revolution against decolonisation* remains critically underappreciated, as is the role of the Pakistanis.<sup>99</sup> Overshadowed by superpower rapprochement, Soviet reforms, and the birth of jihadist internationalism, the war is rarely viewed as an important episode in the history of decolonisation itself. This is a profound oversight. The conflict fundamentally shaped the character of world order; transforming the politics of the postcolonial state, overwhelming traditional forms of anti-colonial politics, and crystallising a new, religiously inflected imperial logic that would culminate in the post-9/11 world. The war machinery of the Cold War was redeployed, its target shifting from communism to a newly constituted 'Islamic threat'. This pivot unleashed a devastating continuum of violence across West Asia, fuelling mass killing, displacement, and legitimising the erosion of civil liberties worldwide. It simultaneously generated a vicious, self-perpetuating ecosystem of conflict – a transnational convergence of militancy, capital, and arms that entangled states, corporations, and private militaries in a global economy of perpetual war.

At the heart of this transformation was the internationalisation and Islamisation of the Afghan–Soviet War. International fighters were drawn not only by the promise of a pure, ideological struggle against the West but also by a profound rejection of the perceived corruption and spiritual bankruptcy of postcolonial regimes. Ayman al-Zawahri, Al Qaida commander and Bin Laden's deputy, summarised his reflections on the purity of the Afghan and Pakistani Mujahideen, in contrast to their foreign comrades. He claimed, 'the Muslim youth in Afghanistan waged the war to liberate Muslim land under purely Islamic slogans, a very vital matter, for many of the liberation battles in our Muslim world had used composite slogans, that mixed Islam, and indeed, sometimes caused Islam to intermingle with leftist, communist slogans'.<sup>100</sup> Here we see a concern with the ideological interlinking of socialist, anti-colonial, Third World liberation and Islamist forms of politics, the antithesis of the Red Shiism of Iranian thinker Ali Shariati, an intellectual figurehead of the Iranian revolution. Ultimately, the Pakistani borderlands provided the ideological workshop that would turn the Afghan–Soviet war into a new form of counter-revolutionary imperial violence, with the global Jihadi movement as its shock troops, something we see playing out in Syria and elsewhere in West Asia today.

The Pakistani state and its allies enabled the transformation of a war of national liberation into an unprecedented Cold War Jihad. This was not the first time the U.S. had sponsored anti-Communist forces. Scholars have revealed changes in the patterns of U.S. empire's relations to

<sup>98</sup> Artem Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), p. 278.

<sup>99</sup> Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*.

<sup>100</sup> Devji, Faisal, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, and Modernity*. (London: Hurst & Company, 2005).

anti-Communist politics, exploring the shifts from supporting aligned authoritarian regimes, to sponsoring death squads and neo-fascists, from Indonesia to Nicaragua and Haiti.<sup>101</sup> The Afghan war, however, inaugurated a radical new precedent, fusing U.S. anti-communism with transnational jihad into a singular, volatile force, seemingly unimaginable without the role played by the ISI and the CIA.

Set apart from the secular anti-imperialism of Algeria or Vietnam, the Afghan–Soviet War erupted at a unique historical confluence. At this historical crossroads, superpower rivalries, the unhealed fractures of decolonisation, and the ambitions of Islamist Jihad converged to forge a militant universalism – an ideological successor to Third World nationalism that redirected the energies of anti-imperial struggle toward the destabilisation of Soviet hegemony.<sup>102</sup> In doing so, it allowed the United States to appropriate the language of liberation for a counter-revolutionary project, effectively turning the Soviet tactic of arming anti-imperial movements against its originator.

As the decisive nexus of empire, militancy, and capital, the war reshaped global power and resistance, fusing the strategic futures of Pakistan, the Muslim world, and the American-led international order.<sup>103</sup> The Pakistani ruling classes' victory in allying with the United States and Saudi Arabia to destroy the Afghan Communist Party's structure and replace it with a new, anti-communist, Jihadist politics, was the start of a kind of politics now visible elsewhere. The war redefined a new form of religiously centred anti-communist politics that was very popular in the 1980s and formed connections with other forms of Islamism and Jihadism across the Middle East, Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caucuses, and Southeast Asia. Through a robust patronage network linking the Pakistani security apparatus to borderland populations and militants, these encounters cultivated a new rebel ideology, virulently anti-communist and explicitly pro-capitalist. The 'Jakarta Method' of the 1950s pioneered state-led anti-communist slaughter; its successor, the 'Islamabad Method' of the 1980s, inaugurated an alliance with Islamist militants to combat Soviet power overseas and eviscerate the domestic left.

The period of the war (1979–1989) thus marked a distinct unravelling of anti-imperial modernisms in the Muslim world. Anti-colonial internationalism, socialism, and pan-Islamic cosmopolitanism gave way to a tighter embrace of the neoliberal military state, nationalists, and Islamist groups. The U.S. and Pakistan's curation of the Afghan resistance privileged foreign Jihadists over local nationalists, a fateful decision that catalysed a cycle of imperial blowback culminating in the West's defeat in 2021. This process forged Pakistan into a fortress for a new warfare model – a hybrid of anti-colonial insurgency and imperial counter-insurgency, fused by the twin engines of anti-communist and jihadist doctrines.<sup>104</sup>

Whilst Zia's regime militarised Pakistani society, introduced a moral order based around strict adherence to state-sponsored Sharia, and implemented a centralised, puritanical vision of religiously minded governance, it cannot take all the 'credit' for Pakistan's late Cold War transformation. For one, transnational sponsorship of militant and religious networks bound Pakistan to the strategies and financial networks of Western powers, but also Gulf monarchies, foremost among them Saudi Arabia. In the dress rehearsals of political struggle in universities and factories, and then later through the militarisation of Islamist student groups into fascist paramilitaries in Bangladesh, the Jamat proved its commitment to state-sponsored violence.

The Jamaat's transformative emergence bridged the divide between political violence, party politics, and militarism, drawing it ever closer to the nexus of state power. As its cadres served as foot

<sup>101</sup> Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anti-Communist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Our World* (Public Affairs, 2020); William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>102</sup> Reuveny and Prakash, 'The Afghanistan war'.

<sup>103</sup> William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>104</sup> Haider Riaz Khan, 'The forever war', *Commune*, 2020.

soldiers both domestically and abroad, the movement gained unprecedented access to state institutions – facilitating its evolution from an emergent populist force, and Pakistan's largest Islamist party, into a key enabler of rebel movements and a significant actor in South Asian counter-insurgencies during the late Cold War. Its complicity in the state's bloody counter-insurgencies, however, stained its legacy and foreclosed any prospect of mass legitimacy in post-war Pakistan.

In the West, this victory spawned a triumphant narrative of ideological closure – from Francis Fukuyama's *End of History* to Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.<sup>105</sup> Yet these hollow, celebratory accounts mask a more profound, obscured history: the late Cold War was transformed in the revolutionary fervour and brutal warfare in West Asia. There, a long arc of imperial and anti-imperial struggle was harnessed by a complex alliance of generals, politicians, contractors, militants, and their international partners. This article has excavated the hidden architecture of the Cold War's end – forged in the borderlands between empire and insurgency. The conclusion now synthesises these arguments, in order to advance a recalibration of late twentieth-century world politics.

## Conclusion

In contrast to mainstream IR scholarship and Cold War historiography, this article foregrounds South–South relations and postcolonial agency in the making – and unmaking – of world orders. It demonstrates that Pakistani conflictual world-making reveals how postcolonial states and societies did not merely respond to imperial designs but actively refashioned global order through often contradictory engagements with empire, anti-colonialism, and internationalism. Grounded in revolutionary periodicals, intelligence archives, and Global South histories, this study disrupts Eurocentric accounts that privilege the view from above.

To reduce the Cold War to a mere East–West rivalry is to miss its essence. It was, more accurately, the violent site of postcolonial world-making. Beneath the superpower clash, the era's defining struggles erupted along the North–South axis – a chaotic theatre of competing postcolonial modernisations, liberation struggles against colonialism, and the rise of counterinsurgent alliances between states and right wing militants. The Eurocentric myth of a 'Long Peace' has long obscured this global disorder: the Cold War conflagrations in the Global South. A truer history recasts the Cold War as the violent spasm of imperial dissolution, animated by the world-historical forces of the postcolonial world which shattered the old colonial empires, even as it enabled a new imperial order that constrained the full promise of liberation.

This article offers broader theoretical and methodological lessons for scholarship. The concepts of *conflictual world-making* and *imperial–anti-imperial relationism* provide a framework for examining how states and societies in the global periphery have actively, if ambivalently, shaped world orders. To better understand the Cold War, decolonisation, and modern disorder, we must look to their generative margins. By adopting a lens that centres transboundary encounters, substate actors, and the dialectical entanglement of imperial and anti-imperial politics, we move beyond the prison of methodological nationalism and Eurocentric teleology. Recognising the insurgent agency of the Global South is essential not just for writing more accurate histories, but for building theories of international politics that are finally equal to the complexity of the world they seek to explain.

The Pakistan borderlands were irrevocably fused to the security state through colonial administrative legacies, Cold War geopolitical pressures, and domestic oligarchic power. This fusion culminated under Zia, who harnessed the military's renewed political authority and an alliance with Islamist forces to remake Pakistani society into a fortress against the Soviet Union. The forms of counter-revolutionary violence deployed since then have only been deepened and extended across the borderlands till the present day. The core principles – from proxy warfare and social

<sup>105</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History*; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Free Press, 2002).

engineering to special forces raids and aerial bombardment – persist across decades, and political paradigms, from the anti-Soviet jihad to the drone campaigns of the twenty-first century. The security template has demonstrated a chilling endurance, its core logic – of managing the frontier through proxy warfare and aerial dominance – seamlessly adapting the anti-Soviet jihad to the U.S.-led War on Terror. Thus, the drone campaigns and special operations of the twenty-first century across West Asia are not a break from history, but the latest iteration of a perpetual conflict engine first activated along the Durand Line.<sup>106</sup>

The Afghan–Soviet War was thus not merely a space of great power rivalry but a site of competing visions of modernity. Its aftershocks – from the Mujahideen wars and the Taliban’s emergence to the U.S.-led occupation and its collapse in 2021 – echo earlier imperial failures from Dien Bien Phu to Algiers. The Cold War world order and its aftermath cannot be understood without recognising the insurgent agency of the Global South – where empires are resisted and remade, client powers defy state control, and interventions reverberate across generations. Pakistan’s conflictual world-making embodies this dialectic. The wars fought on its frontiers were never merely regional conflicts but defining struggles over the future of international order. As the dust settles on yet another imperial tragedy in Afghanistan, the borderlands endure – defiant, ungovernable, and still writing history on their own terms. The enduring legacies of imperial contradiction and anti-imperial resistance demand renewed engagement to reclaim futures beyond empire’s grasp.

**Video Abstract.** To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525101587>.

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<sup>106</sup>Ian Shaw and Majed Akhter, ‘The dronification of state violence’, *Critical Asian Studies*, 46:2 (2014), pp. 211–34.