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Abstract

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was one of the most cataclysmic events of the Cold War, sending shockwaves across the globe. It brought the imminent reality of communist expansion toward the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. As Afghanistan's next-door neighbor, Pakistan shared a long border and over a century of historical ties, making it particularly vulnerable to the Soviet invasion. Pakistan confronted a two-pronged danger: from the east, with India, and from the west, with the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. Relations between the Soviet Union and Pakistan were complex at the time of the invasion, largely due to Pakistan's close ties with the West, particularly the United States, which was the Soviet Union's main rival during the Cold War.

Keywords: Security Challenges, Soviet Occupation, Invasion, Military Infrastructure, Hegemonic Ambitions

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Abstract

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was one of the most cataclysmic events of the Cold War, sending shockwaves across the globe. It brought the imminent reality of communist expansion toward the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. As Afghanistan's next-door neighbor, Pakistan shared a long border and over a century of historical ties, making it particularly vulnerable to the Soviet invasion. Pakistan confronted a two-pronged danger: from the east, with India, and from the west, with the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. Relations between the Soviet Union and Pakistan were complex at the time of the invasion, largely due to Pakistan's close ties with the West, particularly the United States, which was the Soviet Union's main rival during the Cold War.

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Introduction

Since 1947, Pakistan has aligned itself with the Western world, advocating for global security and the expansion of democratic ideals. However, despite South Asia's geostrategic significance, the region has been entangled in chaos and instability. Pakistan and India, the two largest countries in the region, have been engulfed in ongoing disputes, fighting four wars. Both nations have remained key players for international powers seeking to advance their strategic objectives. Pakistan at the time of Independence remained weak militarily and tried to achieve parity with India by seeking an alliance with the Western states especially the United States of

America. India boasted a robust economy and military, accompanied by an extensive diplomatic network that enhanced its importance on the global stage. (Ahmed, 2023; Khan, 2023) This enabled India to influence the foreign policy choices and strategies of major powers at the time, often to the detriment of Pakistan. In the face of increasing threats to Pakistan's security, Pakistan joined the US-sponsored alliances of SEATO and CENTO to ensure her security in the wake of rising threats at her borders and therefore laid the foundations of her commitments towards the ideology of democracy and peaceful co-existence. (Hummel, 1981) Despite the pragmatic role that Pakistan played in containing the spread of communism globally, it did



not receive the political and diplomatic support it deserved from the West. Western failure to stop the Indian and Soviet aggression against Pakistan in 1971 is tantamount to this reality. (Van Hollen, 1980)

At the time of the Soviet invasion, Pakistan was politically isolated and faced sanctions from the Western world, including the United States. Afghanistan had been hostile toward Pakistan since 1947 and was the only country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the United Nations. This historical animosity between Afghanistan and Pakistan further complicated Pakistan's security dilemma after the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Afghanistan consistently supported the Indo-Soviet alliance and aligned its diplomatic preferences with them, often against the interests of Pakistan. The Soviet-Indian alliance posed a significant threat not only to Pakistan but also to global security. The Soviet Union was just 720 miles away from the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, with the province of Baluchistan as the only barrier. Control over this region would have granted the USSR strategic access to the Indian Ocean, increasing the instability in the region and creating a security dilemma for Pakistan. The influx of over 3 million refugees and internal security challenges further worsened Pakistan's predicament. Meanwhile, India's aggressive posturing and military buildup greatly amplified Pakistan's security concerns. At the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan faced significant international isolation and sanctions, largely due to its pursuit of a nuclear program and the presence of a military dictatorship. Pakistan's economy and military were also too underdeveloped to effectively challenge the formidable Soviet military power and India's regional hegemonic ambitions.

Pakistan's unique geography places it near two major powers, China and Russia, as well as the oil-rich yet politically unstable Persian Gulf and Middle East. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan rekindled the dangers reminiscent of 1971 in Pakistan, when India, with the active support of the Soviet Union, dismembered Pakistan. The presence of a superpower on its western border, combined with a hostile India on its eastern border, posed a significant threat to Pakistan's already precarious national security. Moreover, Pakistan's western border remained largely unguarded, as the likelihood of an attack from Afghanistan was

considered minimal. Suddenly the buffer between Pakistan and the Soviet Union which remained there for centuries vanquished and Pakistan was all alone to face the dangers aroused in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with over 120,000 troops to suppress the Mujahideen movement. However, this large Soviet military presence significantly increased the external threats facing Pakistan. Pakistan felt encircled from both the east and west after the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, as both these states played dangerous roles against it and had defense agreements that were to some extent made against Pakistan. During the Bangladesh crisis of 1971, India fully supported the insurgents, providing arms and ammunition to the guerrillas fighting against the Pakistani state. This sense of encirclement was further amplified by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan on Pakistan's western border. Cheema, P. I. (1988) Pakistan's security situation became increasingly complex due to the historical pattern of Soviet expansion into Muslim territories. Over the past 300 years, the Soviet Union had consistently pursued a strategy of southward expansion into Muslim lands, heightening concerns for Pakistan during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (Malik, 1994)

Security Challenges due to the Soviet Union.

Since 1947, Pakistan has never developed strong relations of trust and cooperation with the Soviet Union. The primary reason for this was the USSR's close political and military ties with India, Pakistan's archrival, which created a deep-rooted mistrust between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. (Malik & Zafar, 2024) Not only this but India also supported the Indians the important issues related to Pakistan like the Kashmir issue and other disputes with India. Similarly, SSR also supported India in the wars of 1965 and 1971 which created security concerns for Pakistan. Similarly, many anti-state elements were given shelter in the USSR during the decade of 1970s which proved the Soviet support to destabilize Pakistan.

End of the Buffer between Pakistan and the Soviet Union

Since the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Union had never directly invaded a Third World country,

particularly an ally. Moreover, during the 1970s, the era of Détente saw both the USA and the USSR working to de-escalate tensions and avoid actions that would undermine global peace. (Newell, 1980) The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was an unprecedented shift from this period of relative calm that prevailed between the USA and USSR due to detente. Prior to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan Pakistan had a buffer in the shape of Afghanistan which secured Pakistan from the direct threat of Soviet aggression. Moreover, the lack of communication and road networks, combined with the presence of the rugged terrain of the Hindu Kush Mountain ranges, led policymakers to underestimate the threat posed by the Soviet Union. This geographical isolation made it difficult to perceive an immediate danger from Soviet forces.

Old Enmity between Pakistan and the Soviet Union

Pakistan has consistently sought to cultivate friendly relations with its neighbors and within the broader Asian region, including efforts to improve ties with India and the Soviet Union. However, Indian hegemonic designs, regional conflicts, and geopolitical challenges often hindered these efforts. The Soviet Union viewed Pakistan's decision to join the Western-supported alliances, such as the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), as an attempt to encircle its sphere of influence. Pakistan never had any designs to threaten the Soviet Interest rather Pakistan joined these Western-supported alliances to strengthen its security and to acquire defense capabilities to counter the mounting pressure from India. This alignment with the West led the Soviet Union to regard Pakistan as a hostile state and supported India against Pakistan on different political and geo-strategic issues. Similarly, the USSR developed strong economic and defense ties with India, becoming India's largest arms supplier prior to the 1965 war with Pakistan. This close relationship enabled the Soviet Union to support India against Pakistan, further cementing the relations between Moscow and Delhi. (Hasan, Z. 1968)

Soviet Violations of Pakistan Territorial Sovereignty

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 thrust

Pakistan into a quagmire far beyond its capacity to manage. The defense of the 1,300-mile long, unguarded, and porous border with Afghanistan became a significant challenge for Pakistan, especially with the massive Soviet military buildup in the region, turning border security into a national nightmare. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with over 100,000 soldiers, comprising ten divisions, along with gunship helicopters and modern jets. (Kamrany, N. M. 1982) This formidable military presence posed a serious threat to Pakistan's western border security, an area that Pakistan had previously not regarded as a significant concern for invasion. Cross-border raids by the well-equipped Soviet ground and air forces became a regular occurrence, as they frequently violated the sanctity of Pakistan's international borders with immunity of any kind. These incursions further escalated tensions prevailed due to the presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Between 1985 and 1986, Soviet forces committed 427 ground violations and 45 air violations, resulting in the deaths of innocent Pakistani civilians. Wirsing, R. G. (1987).

Indian Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship and the debacle of East Pakistan

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the painful memories of the East Pakistan debacle were still deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of the Pakistani people. The trauma of losing East Pakistan in 1971, coupled with the Soviet Union's support for India during that conflict, heightened fears of new threats like one that took place in 1971 which dismembered Pakistan of its eastern wing. In 1971, India and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship to strengthen their partnership and shape the strategic environment of South Asia. While they claimed the treaty was aimed at countering Chinese aggression, history has shown that it was primarily used against Pakistan, particularly during the Bangladesh Liberation War, when Soviet support bolstered India's position. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation exposed India's false claim of being a non-aligned country, as it clearly aligned itself with the Soviet Union, a state leading the international communist movement (Singh, S. P. (1979). This treaty contradicted India's position as a neutral player in global politics, revealing its strategic partnership

with the USSR during a critical period in South Asia during the Bangladesh crisis of 1971.

Soviet Military Aid to India after the Invasion of Afghanistan

The Soviet Union remained India's largest supplier of weapons after its independence, with both countries sharing similar strategic and geopolitical objectives on key issues in international politics. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, India embarked on a military modernization program by signing new agreements for the acquisition of sophisticated weapons to increase pressure on Pakistan. (Mukherjee, D. 1986) According to estimates, a large number of Soviet military personnel were stationed in India during the 1980s to support India's military capabilities. Additionally, the Soviet Union agreed to the transfer of technology for the assembly of MiG-21s, MiG-27s, and T-72 tanks. (Mukherjee, D 1986) During 1979-83 more than 75 % of Indian weapon acquisitions were from the USSR which proves the close relations for creating the security dilemma for Pakistan.

Lack of Territorial Depth in Pakistan

Despite its significant strategic and geopolitical location on the world map, Pakistan's physical geography is a critical challenge, as it lacks territorial depth. This limitation makes the country more vulnerable to external threats, particularly from its eastern and western borders, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan increased the implications for the security of Pakistan. The territorial depth of Pakistan varies from 800-1000 kilometers between Afghanistan and India. Pakistan lacked the territorial depth and there were chances that the Indian and the Soviet forces may plan an attack to exploit this weakness of Pakistan. India and the Soviet Union also exploited the East Pakistan issue and played a pivotal role in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Support for Anti-Pakistan Elements in Kabul

Since 1947, the Afghan government has refused to recognize the Durand Line as the legitimate border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, consistently supporting the "Pashtunistan" movement, which sought to incorporate the Pashtun-dominated areas of Pakistan, particularly in the NWFP (now Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa) and Baluchistan. The Soviet Union supported certain factions in Kabul, as well as political and tribal groups within its own borders, that aimed to annex NWFP into Afghanistan and create an independent Baluchistan. Baluchistan was the most security-sensitive region of Pakistan, rich in mineral wealth and cultural history, which heightened its importance for Pakistan's national security. Khan, Z. A. (2020). Baluchistan remained an underdeveloped region for centuries due to a lack of water resources and a low population with huge land features consisting of deserts, mountain ranges, and barren topography. Javaid, P. D. U., & Jahangir, J. (2020). Baluchistan: a key factor in global politics. *South Asian Studies*, 30(2). The Soviet Union also backed rebels in Baluchistan with the aim of creating an independent Baluchistan, allowing it to establish a direct presence in the Indian Ocean and the oil-rich Persian Gulf. This would have given the Soviets proximity to the strategically significant Strait of Hormuz, a critical waterway for global oil shipments and a strategically important choke point. Goldman, M. F. (1984). Many rebel elements advocating for an independent Baluchistan resided in Kabul during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1988. They benefited from Soviet support to conduct activities against Pakistan's interests, further destabilizing the region and exacerbating tensions between the two countries which led to the security dilemma for Pakistan. (Mansoor, H. 2014, June 11)

Security Challenges Due to India

Since 1947, India has created challenges for Pakistan in various political spheres to undermine its global significance. Driven by hegemonic ambitions to dominate Pakistan and assert itself as the regional superpower in South Asia, India pursued policies that aimed to weaken Pakistan's influence. Despite this, Pakistan consistently opposed India's hegemonic objectives and charted its own foreign policy to safeguard regional peace and security in the best possible manner by initiating close relations with the countries of South Asia. India, despite being the strongest military and economic power in South Asia, forged military alliances, igniting an arms race in the region. India's ambition to become the regional hegemon led it to become the largest importer of military hardware during the Cold War. (Siddiqui, 2024). This buildup created a significant security dilemma for Pakistan, forcing it to enhance

its own defense capabilities to maintain a strategic and conventional balance in the region.

Indian Aggressive Military Posture

Throughout the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, India continued to apply pressure on Pakistan by acquiring new weapons and expanding its military capabilities. During this period, India significantly increased its arms purchases and developed infrastructure aimed at enhancing its ability to project military power, particularly in a way that could threaten Pakistan. This arms buildup further escalated tensions between the two countries and nearly led to an all-out war, especially during the Brasstacks exercise conducted by India near the Pakistan border. During the 1980s, India went on a weapon-buying spree to tilt the balance of power in its favor against Pakistan. India upgraded its military by purchasing modern jets from the West to offset Pakistan and create security concerns for its neighbor. This Indian weaponization program also included the acquisition of Soviet-made MiG-31s and French-made Mirage 2000s (Singh, 1984).

Support for the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

India and the USSR have a long history of cooperation and friendship. The defeat of India in the 1962 war with China and the Sino-Soviet split further brought the two states very close to each other. (VANBRANDWIJK, 1974). Throughout the Cold War, India and the Soviet Union maintained a close relationship, with the Soviet Union extending its influence over India in all spheres of international relations. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, India pressed for the cessation of hostilities and respect for Afghan sovereignty but blatantly abstained from voting against the Soviet Union when the resolution condemning Soviet actions in Afghanistan was presented in the United Nations General Assembly (Horn, 1983).

Indira Doctrine

India has a long history of disputes with its neighboring countries, particularly with Pakistan and China. Even smaller neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal have experienced tensions with India, which has consistently viewed South Asia as its sphere of influence and sought to

assert itself as the key decision-maker on political issues in the region. According to this doctrine, India does not accept the involvement of external powers in the disputes in South Asia. Any attempt by a regional country to seek help from outside the region is viewed as going against India's interests and will be considered anti-India. This reflects India's desire to maintain its dominant role and prevent foreign influence in the region's political dynamics. In fact, the victory against Pakistan in 1971 blindfolded the Indian political establishment and led them to believe that they could control the political outcomes of disputes in the South Asian region. Hagerty, D. T. (1991).

Enunciation of Sunderji Doctrine by India

To further pressure Pakistan during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, India introduced a new military doctrine called the Sunderji Doctrine, conceived by General Krishnaswamy Sunderji, the 13th Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army, in the 1980s. This doctrine was tested in 1987 when India conducted the Brasstacks exercises along the border with Pakistan. The strategy was based on the concept that seven Indian defensive corps would be positioned near the border with Pakistan, and after repulsing any attacks from Pakistan, three strike corps placed deep inside India would launch a counterattack against Pakistan along the Rajasthan-Sindh axis, aiming to bifurcate Pakistan by cutting the communication links between northern and southern Pakistan. These three strike corps would consist of armored divisions, mechanized infantry divisions, and artillery divisions to deliver a significant blow to Pakistan's defenses. During the Brasstacks exercises, Pakistan effectively neutralized Indian maneuvers through the timely deployment of forces along the border, surprising Indian military planners.

Operation Meghdoot 13th April 1984

India sought to exploit the security situation faced by Pakistan after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The main idea was to apply two-pronged pressure on Pakistan from the eastern and western flanks to achieve the strategic objectives of both India and the Soviet Union. During that era, Pakistan's attention was focused on its western borders due to the presence of a large number of Soviet military forces in Afghanistan. On April 13,

1984, India launched a military operation in the disputed region of Siachen and attempted to annex the area, which covers approximately 10,000 square miles and has a length of 75 kilometers. It is worth mentioning that this glacier is the largest outside the North and South Poles (Padder, 2013). It was believed that India and the Soviet Union might plan an attack through the Wakhan Corridor and execute a pincer movement, as the Karakoram Highway, the vital artery linking Pakistan and China, was just 20 miles away (Husain, 1992). Later on, it transpired that India occupied Siachen in order to launch an attack on Gilgit and Skardu to cripple Pakistan's control of the region of Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan (Wirsing, 2008). Similarly, the Wakhan Corridor was fully occupied by the Soviets, and India's presence in Siachen posed a serious threat to the northern regions of Pakistan and China.

Brass Tack Exercises 1986-87

During the entire duration of the Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan, India continued to create strategic dilemmas for Pakistan through various methods. Pakistan was never a direct threat to India, but India considered Pakistan a hindrance to its ambition of leading the geopolitical discourse in South Asia. Throughout the 1980s, India rapidly increased its arms imports, and by 1986, its defense budget had risen to \$9.73 billion, compared to Pakistan's \$2.54 billion. This comparison highlights that Pakistan could never match India's conventional military superiority. The primary objective of the Brasstacks exercises was to test the efficacy of the Sundarji Doctrine, intimidate Pakistan, and ultimately aim to split Pakistan into two halves (Wirsing, 2008). India mobilized more than 200,000 thousand troops in the Rajhistan-Sindh axis which included 2 armored divisions, one mechanized division, and a large number of infantry divisions (Khalid, 2012). These were the largest military maneuvers since the end of World War 2 and to counter the Indian threat Pakistan army also placed the 1st Armor Dive, 6 6th Armor Div, 37th Infantry Div, and 17th Infantry Div near the Border with India.

Internal Security Challenges arising Due to Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan

Pakistan faced the direct impacts of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on its socio-economic fabric

and confronted numerous internal problems. Refugees began pouring into Pakistan after the 1973 coup against King Zahir Shah, but the pace and number of refugees significantly increased with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Ahmed, 2023; Malik & Zafar, 2024). The presence of more than 3 million refugees and their rehabilitation posed a significant challenge for Pakistan. Similarly, providing shelter and food was a major issue, especially given Pakistan's weak economy at the time. To sustain their livelihood, many of these refugees became involved in the smuggling of contraband and weapons. Since the refugees were undocumented, numerous spies also entered Pakistan disguised as refugees and engaged in sabotage activities against the country which gave them shelter.

Refugees Crisis and the Weak Economy of Pakistan

The Soviet military actions against unarmed civilians and brutal tactics in dealing with the Afghan freedom movement compelled the migration of the Afghanistan population towards Pakistan. Pakistan was a first choice rather than any other neighboring country due to century-old relations between the Pashtun tribes living along the borders between Afghanistan and Pakistan. More than 3 million refugees settled in Pakistan in 386 camps in the different parts of NWP and Baluchistan (HILALI, 2002). The burden due to these refugees can be gauged from the fact that during Zia era Pakistan had to take a loan of 16 billion dollars in order to make up for the financial needs including the rehabilitation of refugees. These refugees created many socio-economic problems for Pakistan as they brought a large number of livestock with them which led to scuffles between refugees and locals for the grazing of land and the forests were chopped down at will to meet the fuel requirements. Similarly, these refugees competed with the locals in the transport and other businesses which created animosity between them. In the province of Balochistan ethnic balance between the Balochis and Pashtuns was disturbed exaggerating the stance already present Baloch nationalist movement. These refugees also created an unemployment problem for Pakistan as these refugees indulged in the business of transport and real estate.

Rampant Bombing in Pakistan

The Soviet Union blamed Pakistan for its failure to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan and started a bad game of bombing in Pakistan. The first motive was to discredit the legitimacy of the government at the international level and to arouse the sentiments of Pashtuns and Baloch ethnicity against the writ of Government. From 1980-1988 more than a thousand people were killed and the same number of people were injured in these indiscriminate bombings in the markets, Cinemas, and political congregations. (HILALI, A. Z. [2002](#)). Prior to these bombings, Pakistan was a very safe country to live and these activities were carried out by the agents of the Afghanistan secret agency KHAD in collaboration with the soviet spy agency KGB. (HILALI, A. Z. [2002](#)). These bombings were carried out in all provinces to tarnish the image of Pakistan as a responsible and peace-loving state.

Increased Sectarian Violence in Pakistan

This Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed the security dynamic of the Pakistani state and the socio-political environment of the masses. Prior to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan Pakistan was a liberal country where the people of different religions and beliefs were free to practice their ideologies. The Soviet war in Afghanistan gave birth to religious extremism in Pakistan and sectarian violence became the new source of conflict and internal danger. Madrassah culture mushroomed in Pakistan during the decade of 1980s. The number of madrassahs reached 50, 000 from just 137 in 1947 at the time of the Independence of Pakistan.

Law and Order Issues

These 3 million refugees were free to move to any part of Pakistan and settle at their will. Without proper means of livelihood, many of them often resorted to crime. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the tribal areas of Pakistan, along with the rest of the country, experienced an influx of arms and ammunition. These weapons became readily available, as the Afghan government distributed them to gain the sympathy of tribes along the

border, and CIA-supplied weapons for the Mujahedeen also found their way into Pakistani markets. The booming weapons trade in Pakistan's tribal areas, driven by high demand, led to the widespread availability of these arms in cities across the country. Consequently, many refugees became involved in criminal activities, including robberies, snatching, and killings. (Cheema, P. I. [1983](#)).

Conclusion

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked the first time the Soviet Union invaded a country outside of Europe. The invasion had multiple dimensions: the Soviet Union feared the rise of an Islamic movement within Afghanistan and was concerned that an Islamic revolution might occur, similar to the one that took place in Iran. The Soviet Union, always sensitive to threats along its borders, took action to nullify perceived risks. This invasion became a nightmare for American interests in the oil-rich Middle East, especially after the Shah of Iran was deposed in 1979 (Khan, [2023](#); Siddiqui, [2024](#)).

At that time, Pakistan was facing economic and military sanctions and did not have favorable relations with the Soviet Union. Pakistan's nuclear program and poor human rights record further complicated its ability to cooperate with the West. Additionally, during the period of détente between the USA and the Soviet Union, South Asia—and Pakistan in particular—held little significance for the West. India's nuclear tests in 1974 and its subsequent military expansion left Pakistan even more vulnerable to Soviet actions in Afghanistan.

Two years later after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the United States recognized the gravity of the situation and, in 1982, offered Pakistan a \$7.4 billion aid package to provide much-needed economic and military assistance. Pakistan utilized this aid to improve its defense capabilities by acquiring new weapons and launching socio-economic development projects. More importantly, Pakistan's international stature improved, and it was regarded as a responsible state in the fight against communism, contributing to global peace efforts.

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