

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

5 on 45: Trump's tweet about Pakistan, explained

January 3, 2018

CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

MADIHA AFZAL

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

HUDAK: Hi, my name is Madiha Afzal, and I'm a nonresident fellow in the Global Economy and Development program at Brookings. I'm also the author of "Pakistan Under Siege," a book just released by Brookings Press.

So President Trump's first tweet of 2018 came as a surprise. First thing in the morning on January 1st he tweeted about Pakistan and I quote: "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan with little help. No more!"

It's not the content of this tweet that is surprising per se. This has been the president and his administration's repeated refrain on Pakistan since the South Asia strategy was announced in August. And the crux of this policy really is that Pakistan needs to take action against the Haqqani network which is a brutal faction of the Afghan Taliban that attacks U.S. forces and Afghan government targets in Afghanistan allegedly from their safe havens in Pakistan. And the Trump administration is saying that until Pakistan does so military aid that's been promised to it will not be released to it.

Now President Obama had also pressured Pakistan and expressed frustration over their inaction on the Haqqani network. But at the same time the Obama administration also acknowledged Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts that had helped America and it acknowledged the lives Pakistan had lost to terror. What is really singular about the Trump administration's policy on Pakistan is that it is focused entirely on the Haqqanis. There's nothing positive in the rhetoric on Pakistan. And the only mention of economic ties with Pakistan in the National Security Strategy for instance that the Trump administration put out is that they will be contingent on Pakistan taking action against militants and terrorist groups.

So what's the surprise in this tweet? The first is the timing. That it was the first tweet of the year signifies a change in priority or in pressure—taking it up a notch. The tone was also particularly harsh. Even though in the past it's been very strong this also took it up a degree. The mention of the exact monetary amount, 33 billion, as opposed to just talking about billions and billions of dollars that has been given to Pakistan is also significant, as is saying that Pakistan has given the U.S. “little help.”

So all of this is designed to be a public shaming for Pakistan and to function as pressure on it. And it follows what the U.S. sees as inaction on the part of the Pakistanis on the Haqqanis. So this entire fall Pakistan has been saying that it's eliminated all its safe havens, but no one in the U.S. believes that. Pakistan has made counterterror gains against the Pakistani Taliban that attacks Pakistani citizens but it has largely led the Haqqanis and the LET, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which attacks targets in India off the hook.

To no surprise Pakistan's government has reacted with outrage at this tweet and it sparked protests in the country. And it's never been said quite this way before—this is what many in Washington actually believe about Pakistan—that it is duplicitous, that it's played a double game with America. And many here think that it's time for the dysfunctional relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. to change and that it has so far failed. Looking the other way has failed, carrots and sticks in the previous administration's policy didn't work, so why not cut off aid?

There are reasons that the strategy in my view as it currently stands and this kind of publicly strong rhetoric and public shaming will be counterproductive. And I will argue that there is a better way forward on both sides. The first is on the Pakistani side. Pakistan needs to stop its denials of safe havens which are frankly unbelievable. Fighting the Pakistan Taliban isn't the same as fighting the Haqqanis or the Lashkar-e-Taiba or rooting out extremism which it is not doing. And it should understand that the world is smart enough to know the difference, but America doesn't also need to publicly shame Pakistan into submission. It can acknowledge Pakistani lives lost. It can acknowledge the history of the relationship and where Pakistan has cooperated with the U.S. and most importantly it can work to support elements in Pakistan that realize the

harm that militant groups like the Haqqanis and the Lashkar-e-Taiba due to it. That is not Pakistan's military, and Pakistan's military is the segment of the Pakistani state that the U.S. has always preferred to work with for its stability, for its strength, for its short term cooperation. But it is also elements in Pakistan's military who use militant groups or think of militant groups as strategic assets, as the good Taliban versus the bad Taliban. There are signs however that the civilian government in Pakistan, its democratically elected government, understands better that these groups, the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqanis, also pose an existential threat to Pakistan itself.

And so America can support its civilians over its military if it wants the Haqqanis to be rooted out. This is not a short term strategy, but for any success in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, America needs to think in the longer term with Pakistan.

PITA: If you've been listening to 5 on 45 and like what you're hearing, please take a minute to rate and review us on iTunes. And don't forget to follow us and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts.