

# BEYOND THE TRUMPIAN BLUSTER: IS THERE A LONGER GAME ON PAKISTAN?

JOSHUA T. WHITE

FEBRUARY 2018

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Trump administration announced in January 2018 the suspension of most U.S. security assistance to Pakistan. Critics have argued that the decision was poorly executed and will prove insufficient to change Pakistan's "strategic calculus" toward its neighbors. These critiques, while persuasive, may overestimate what the administration intended to achieve from the announcement and underestimate its willingness to pursue a longer game in South Asia.

It is unrealistic to expect that pressure on Pakistan can serve as the primary policy fulcrum for shifting the balance of power in Afghanistan. That said, this policy brief argues that the aid suspension introduced five distinct opportunities for the United States to advance its interests in South Asia over the coming year by (1) reducing U.S. "reputational exposure" to Pakistan; (2) minimizing security assistance as a mutual irritant in the relationship; (3) signaling U.S. seriousness to India and China; (4) stepping up pressure for action against the Haqqani Network; and (5) presaging tougher policy action in other domains.

Securing even these modest gains depends on the administration's ability to carry out a more disciplined policy process and messaging campaign, carefully manage risks to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, and adopt a public posture that does not undermine those Pakistani elites who are trying to use this moment to spark a debate about Pakistan's own choices and the future it is making for itself.

The Trump administration's recent decision to suspend most security assistance to Pakistan has been met with considerable skepticism by American foreign policy commentators who have argued that the president's blunt approach is unlikely to change Pakistan's strategic calculus. The critics are not wrong. But they may be overestimating what the administration intended to achieve from the announcement, and underestimating the White House's willingness to pursue a longer game in South Asia.

There have been three primary critiques of the administration's aid suspension. First, critics have argued that the roll-out was clumsy, seemingly sparked by an impulsive presidential tweet rather than a fully considered interagency process. Indeed, the State Department's own haphazard background briefing created the appearance of an internal scramble to align policy *post-hoc* with the president's pronouncement.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not this is true—and the full story has yet to come out—the awkward roll-out raises serious questions about whether the administration can carry out sustained and effective policies in the region in peacetime, much less in crisis.

The second critique has been that the president's bluster against Pakistan was, on its face, counterproductive. What country responds constructively to a public broadside from Washington? A small, vulnerable nation might. But not Pakistan. Even as the official Pakistani response was admirably measured, the country's media and parliament predictably descended into outrage, constraining the government's ability to meet U.S. demands without losing face.

In the short term, that too is unhelpful. But the United States is not necessarily playing a short-term game. I saw first-hand how, throughout the latter years of the Obama administration, Pakistani leaders had become inured to repeated critiques from Washington and overly-vague threats that there would be "implications" for Pakistan's decision to provide a permissive environment to the Taliban, its

affiliate the Haqqani Network, and a range of anti-Indian militant groups. After a while, those words began to ring hollow. President Trump's caustic language no doubt painted Pakistani leaders into a corner, but it sent the kind of disruptive signal that—if combined with disciplined follow-up—could clarify Pakistan's choices in the longer term.

The third critique has been that the new policy will not work. The argument goes something like this: The United States and Pakistan have had a fraught relationship for decades. In the post-9/11 era, despite meaningful but episodic cooperation against al-Qaida, the United States has increasingly sought to change Pakistan's "strategic calculus" and convince it to turn away from its sponsorship of proxy militant groups targeting Afghanistan and India, and toward a regional model oriented around constructive economic connectivity. Both Washington's inducements in the form of aid, and threats in the form of repeated warnings, have failed to change Pakistan's behavior. Given the diminishing value of U.S. security assistance, and China's recent multi-billion dollar investments in Pakistan, the Trump administration's aid suspension will likely meet the same dismal fate as previous attempts to make Pakistan the kind of partner that the United States wishes it would be.

On both logical and historical grounds, this argument is persuasive. Defense strategists have long recognized that if deterrence is hard, compellence is even harder. Altering a country's strategic culture, the stories it tells itself that shape its decisionmaking, is harder still. The idea that holding in abeyance a few hundred million dollars of security assistance—funds that have for years been on a downward trajectory, and that Pakistan has long expected might be withheld—would prompt dramatic changes in Pakistani policy is unrealistic. It is therefore equally unrealistic to expect that pressure on Pakistan can serve as the primary policy fulcrum for shifting the balance of power in Afghanistan.

---

1 "Background Briefing with Senior State Department Officials on Security Assistance to Pakistan," U.S. State Department, January 4, 2018, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/276858.htm>.

## FIVE OPPORTUNITIES

White House planners undoubtedly know that a conditional aid suspension will not change Pakistan's overall strategic calculus. What then might the administration realistically be seeking to accomplish? Whether intentionally or otherwise, January's announcement introduced five distinct opportunities for the United States to advance its interests in South Asia over the coming year. Some of these opportunities are valuable in their own right, as continuation of earlier efforts (including under the Obama administration) to bring the U.S.-Pakistan relationship to a more politically and economically sustainable plane. In other cases, the decision may have value as a means of setting up other forms of influence to shape Pakistan's actions. But these opportunities come with an important caveat: they are only meaningful if the United States can adeptly manage the risks that come from a more assertive posture toward Pakistan.

### **1. Reduce U.S. "reputational exposure" to Pakistan**

National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster captured the administration's view perhaps most vividly when he said that the U.S. relationship with Pakistan "can no longer bear the weight of contradictions."<sup>2</sup> Those contradictions have come at some cost to the United States. The dissonance of labeling Pakistan a Major Non-NATO Ally and an "essential partner" while declining to certify that it has taken meaningful action against groups that directly threaten U.S. forces in Afghanistan has long been awkward for the United States government, difficult to explain to the American people, and detrimental to U.S. credibility with Pakistan.

Extreme candor is not always a wise course of action in international politics. But the gulf between the rhetoric and the reality of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship had become so wide as to be corrosive. A conditional aid suspension presents the opportunity

to send a message that, while the United States continues to seek a productive relationship with Pakistan, it will no longer pretend that one exists when and where it does not.

### **2. Minimize security assistance as a mutual irritant in the relationship**

The billions of dollars provided to Pakistan in the post-9/11 era have, on the whole, served clear U.S. interests: supporting counterterrorism actions that decimated al-Qaida; incentivizing robust intelligence cooperation; and providing Pakistan with the capabilities to target militants on the ground, in the air, and at sea. But in recent years, as the al-Qaida threat has dramatically diminished and the threat to U.S. forces posed by the Haqqani Network has grown, it has become increasingly difficult to justify high levels of security assistance to Pakistan. (Pakistan has consistently been one of the top five recipients of foreign military financing.<sup>3</sup>)

Ironically, the high levels of security assistance have seeded discontent in both capitals. In Washington, the aid has prompted grumbling that the United States now gives far more than it gets, and that U.S. assistance is met not with gratitude but with grievances fanned by the Pakistani security establishment. In Islamabad, the aid has fed an unhelpful narrative that the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is narrowly transactional, and that Pakistan is not being duly compensated for its historical losses in the war on terror.

A complete cessation of all assistance—including defense training and exchanges, counter-narcotics, and broad-based economic support—would arguably undermine U.S. interests over the long term and further disempower Pakistan's already weak civilian leadership. But by scaling down defense cooperation dollars, the United States can begin to remove an irritant and lay the groundwork for a more realistic relationship.

---

<sup>2</sup> Greta Van Susteren, "VOA Interview: Security Adviser McMaster Discusses Iran, Pakistan," *Voice of America*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-interview-national-security-adviser-hr-mcmaster-pakistan-iran/4191703.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Security Aid: Foreign Military Financing," Security Assistance Monitor, <https://securityassistance.org/data/country/military/Foreign%20Military%20Financing/2000/2018/all/Global/>.

### **3. Signal U.S. seriousness to India and China**

The Trump team has continued to pursue the kind of robust defense and security relationship with India that was charted by the Bush and Obama administrations. Even as these bilateral ties have deepened over the last decade, Indian officials have grouched that the United States is all talk and little action when it comes to threats to their security that emanate from Pakistan. The aid suspension to Pakistan is an opportunity for the United States to send a signal of reassurance to New Delhi that Washington is willing to take tougher measures to induce better behavior from India's regional rival.

At the same time, the suspension should discomfit Beijing. China is undertaking multi-billion dollar investments in Pakistan under the rubric of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and its leaders cannot be pleased to consider the prospect that the flagship partner of their Belt and Road Initiative is on a path toward global isolation. My recent meetings with South Asia experts in China left me with the distinct impression that Chinese enthusiasm for CPEC is increasingly tempered by a subtle anxiety over Pakistan's place in the global order. To the extent that the U.S. aid suspension signals that Pakistan may be headed down a path toward losing international partners and support, it could spur China to quietly leverage its influence to encourage positive steps against militant groups.

To be clear, these signals to India and China do not come without complications. The long-standing policy of "de-hyphenating" its approaches toward India and Pakistan has allowed U.S. policymakers to pursue their interests with both countries on more or less separate tracks, avoiding a reckoning except in times of crisis in the subcontinent. A more explicit tilt toward India might set the U.S.-India relationship on an even stronger footing and be cathartic for those in the United States who have grown frustrated with Pakistan, but it risks accelerating a more polarized regional order in which the United States is seen as

a partisan actor that Pakistan is unwilling to engage in times of crisis.

### **4. Step up pressure for action against the Haqqani Network**

Trump administration officials, and those from the Obama administration before them, have not minced words when it comes to the threat posed by the Haqqani Network. The American view is that, while Pakistan displaced many militant groups in its Waziristan campaigns beginning in 2014, the Haqqani leadership made its way northward into tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where it has operated largely unmolested by the Pakistani security services. There is a growing body of public reporting that points toward a continued Haqqani presence in these border areas.<sup>4</sup> Rejecting U.S. claims that specific and actionable intelligence has been shared and not been acted upon, the Pakistani government adamantly denies that it is harboring or otherwise facilitating the Haqqanis.

Even within U.S. circles, there are disagreements as to whether or not the expulsion of Haqqani leadership and associated support networks from Pakistani territory would decisively alter battlefield dynamics in Afghanistan. (My own view is that it would be meaningful but not decisive.) But even incremental action against the Haqqanis would be valuable to the United States. The network is now well integrated into the wider Taliban movement, and represents one of the most acute force protection risks to U.S. forces anywhere in the world. Moreover, even if it is not directly responsible for all of Afghanistan's woes, the high-profile nature of Haqqani-linked terrorism—such as the recent series of high-profile attacks in Kabul—have helped to poison the political atmosphere in the capital, fomenting tensions inside the government and diminishing the political space for the kind of eventual settlement that even President Trump grudgingly acknowledges is a long-term goal for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

---

4 See, e.g., "Tag Archives: Haqqani Network," FDD Long War Journal, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/tags/haqqani-network>; U.S. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," (Arlington, VA: U.S. Department of Defense, December 2017), 18, <https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/15/2001856979/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DEC-2017-FINAL-UNCLASS-BASE.PDF>.



It is widely believed that Pakistan has been loath to act against the Haqqani leadership because it serves as a hedge against uncertainty in Afghanistan. That may well be true. As the Kabul attacks gruesomely demonstrate, U.S. pressure has thus far failed to precipitate significant Pakistani action against the Haqqanis. The suspension of security assistance alone will not change this dynamic. But by stepping up the private and public drumbeat against the Haqqanis, the administration may be hoping to demonstrate its willingness to follow through on threats in a way that incentivizes the Pakistani military to accede to incremental action against the group and its facilitators. If this eventually happens—and there are plenty of reasons for skepticism—it would be far short of a silver bullet for the war in Afghanistan. But it would not be inconsequential: even relatively modest steps could produce an outsized effect in protecting the now-growing number of U.S. forces in theater, and giving some political breathing room to the troubled National Unity Government.

### **5. Presage tougher policy action in other domains**

Finally, the suspension of security assistance ought to suggest to Pakistan that the Trump administration is willing to take further measures to protect what it perceives to be vital U.S. interests. It is no secret that many if not most of the escalatory actions suggested by commentators—such as withdrawing Pakistan’s Major Non-NATO Ally status, sanctioning Pakistani intelligence officers, or undertaking invasive and unilateral cross-border operations against militants—are either so symbolic as to be unpersuasive, or so high-profile as to invite retaliatory action that actually constrains U.S. options in the region.<sup>5</sup>

One domain in which the United States does have significant leverage is with respect to its influence in international financial organizations. The U.S. government has used its position in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to press Pakistan to shut

down “charitable” organizations such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa that the U.N. has deemed to be fronts for militant groups, or risk being added again to the so-called gray list of countries requiring ongoing monitoring for their deficiencies in preventing terrorist financing. The U.S. government also has a strong voice in the World Bank and Asian Development Bank—two of Pakistan’s largest donors.

Pakistani official economists have recently been adamant that they will not seek another program from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilize Pakistan’s macroeconomic condition. (The last program concluded in September 2016.) Given the worrisome state of Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves and its accumulating debt to China and other international creditors, outside experts deem it likely that Pakistan will opt to approach the IMF in the next year or two. If and when it does, the United States will face a difficult decision about how to use its influence with the IMF in a way that advances U.S. interests in Pakistan but avoids politicizing what is supposed to be a decision made on technical grounds.

Without the IMF’s intervention, Pakistan would have to consider politically difficult steps such as devaluing its currency and reining in fiscal deficits and the subsidies that contribute to them. Such steps would bring hardship for many ordinary Pakistanis, and could ironically focus public ire on elected leaders and technocrats far more than on the powerful army.

These risks to Pakistan’s economic stability and civil-military balance notwithstanding, the Trump administration’s curt suspension of security assistance suggests that U.S. officials may indeed be willing to take a tougher line than in the past. It is too early to say whether or not this alters the calculation of decisionmakers in Pakistan, but—together with the steps in the FATF—it does raise the troubling specter that Pakistan may increasingly find itself isolated from global financial markets.

---

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Husain Haqqani and Lisa Curtis, “A New U.S. Approach to Pakistan: Enforcing Aid Conditions without Cutting Ties,” (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, February 6, 2017), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/files/publications/20170203HaqqaniCurtisANewUSApproachtoPakistanEnforcingAidConditionswithoutCuttingTies.pdf>.

## UNDERPROMISE, OVERDELIVER

Even if the administration can take advantage of each of these five opportunities, the gains in the near- and mid-term are likely to be modest: bringing the relationship to a more politically and financially sustainable plane, better protecting U.S. troops in Afghanistan, providing some political relief to the government in Kabul, and bolstering U.S. credibility in a way that could lay the groundwork for a somewhat more effective use of leverage in the future.

Securing even these modest gains is far from guaranteed. It depends, first, on the administration's ability to manage a disciplined policy process and messaging campaign. The January announcement raised real questions about whether this is possible under a president who relishes political disruption. If, on one hand, President Trump's brash rhetoric becomes a recurring feature in the relationship, it will close off space for any practical cooperation or real concessions by Pakistan. If, on the other hand, various departments within the U.S. government feel that they have a free hand to subtly countermand the president's guidance (the Defense Department's public messaging has been notably muddled) it may diminish any wider value that might be found in the security assistance decision.

Realizing these gains also requires that the United States carefully manage risks to its mission in Afghanistan. Were Pakistan to cut off ground or air lines of communication, U.S. defense planners would scramble to secure alternate routes—each of which would almost certainly be considerably more expensive, or more restrictive, than the current access that Pakistan permits. (President Trump likely began laying the groundwork for alternatives through Central Asia when he spoke with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in December and hosted Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev at the White House in January.) The administration also ought to be realistic about the ways in which taking a tougher line with Islamabad might complicate its own larger political objective in Afghanistan by disincentivizing Pakistan's efforts—however flawed—to bring the Taliban to the peace table.

Finally, the success of any incremental strategy will depend in part on the administration's ability to demonstrate that it wants to retain open channels to understand and, as appropriate, address Pakistan's legitimate political, security, and economic concerns in the region. This does not mean that U.S. officials have to accept Pakistan's specious argument that resolving the Kashmir dispute with India is somehow a prerequisite for peace along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. But it does mean that, looking ahead to the coming year, a strategy that relies too heavily on bluster may end up being cathartic for American officials but toxic for those Pakistani elites in the civilian government and within the army itself who are trying to use this moment to spark a debate about Pakistan's own choices and the future it is making for itself.

The history of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is one filled with mutual disappointments, mutual dependencies, and—over the long arc—a mutual recognition that neither country benefits from a sustained rupture in ties. Both sides know this, yet are in this moment constrained by the very public nature of the fall-out in the relationship. The U.S. administration suffers from being judged against the expectation that its policy steps will somehow change Pakistan's fundamental orientation; for its part, the Pakistani government suffers from the unrealistic expectation that acceding to Washington's requests is tantamount to diminishing its own standing as a sovereign state. In this environment, both sides would be wise to underpromise, overdeliver, and consider carefully the risks of litigating their grievances in the public eye.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua T. White is a nonresident fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, and associate professor of the practice of South Asia studies and fellow at the Edwin O. Reischauer Center for East Asia Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington. He previously served at the White House as senior adviser and director for South Asian affairs at the National Security Council.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment, and the analysis and recommendations of the Institution's scholars are not determined by any donation.