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The Current: What did the Pakistani prime minister's visit with Trump achieve?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to "The Current," part of the Brookings Podcast Network. On Monday, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan met with President Trump at the White House. With us today to discuss this is Madiha Afzal, a visiting fellow here at Brookings.

Madiha, this meeting between the two countries was billed as something of a diplomatic reset. Can you give us a little background of U.S-Pakistan relations under the Trump administration and to why this fence mending was necessary?

AFZAL: Sure, absolutely. Very memorably, in early January of 2018, President Trump said that Pakistan had committed nothing but lies and deceit in its relationship with the United States. And he quickly followed that by cutting off security assistance to Pakistan. So, the relationship was at a real low at the beginning of the Trump administration. And when Prime Minister Khan was elected in July of 2018, just a few months after that, he and President Trump had a war of words on Twitter, where again President Trump accused Pakistan of being deceitful, and taking aid, and giving the U.S. nothing in return. And Prime Minister Khan defended the country and said that it had lost tens of thousands of people in the war on terror.

Soon after that, apparently Senator Lindsey Graham, who visited Pakistan and enjoyed his meeting with Prime Minister Khan, said that he thought that Prime Minister Khan and President Trump would actually enjoy meeting each other. And you know, he actually said similar personalities and people have speculated that they have similar personalities, not least because these are two celebrity-turned-populist politicians and are both impulsive and somewhat unpredictable. And given Pakistan's help with the Afghan peace process in recent months, and sort of the pressure that Pakistan can put on the Afghan Taliban to bring it to the table with the Afghan government and the role it can play there, it became increasingly necessary to make sure that the relationship was reset and that a meeting was held to sort of formalize this role.

PITA: And what other items were on the agenda for this meeting?

AFZAL: Well, the items on the agenda were Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, energy, and trade, ostensibly. But India was discussed in particular, you know, groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed were discussed. Pakistan, in the run up to the meeting, also arrested Hafiz Saeed, who is the leader of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, an anti-India militant group.

PITA: During the discussion, President Trump brought up this claim that Indian Prime Minister Modi had asked him to mediate in the dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir. As expected, this claim was very quickly refuted by Indian officials. Can you talk a little bit about what sort of effect, to put it charitably, a diplomatic blunder like this has on the relationship with Pakistan and what that means for how Prime Minister Khan views dealing with President Trump going forward?

AFZAL: I think the Pakistani government, even before Prime Minister Khan probably reached his next destination after his meeting with President Trump, saw that President Trump's offer to mediate and his statement that Prime Minister Modi had actually asked for President Trump to mediate in the Kashmir conflict -- it had been denied by the Ministry of External Affairs in India past midnight Delhi time. And so, the Pakistani side knew that this offer and the statement, which probably was too good to be true, was in fact too good to be true. And so, the Pakistani side -- it confirmed their notion that, you know, President Trump may impulsively say some things that may not necessarily hold out. And they've sort of moved on to the other successes, as they view it, of this meeting and this summit.

PITA: What are some the other successes?

AFZAL: First of all, there is the relationship between the two. As I said, these celebrity-turned-politicians who are both populist politicians. People have remarked upon their unpredictability. People have remarked upon how they might have similar personalities, and so they might get along, but because they are impulsive and unpredictable, they just might not. And so, there was a lot of sort of anticipation going into this meeting of how they would get along and the relationship really had to be established beyond that Twitter war of words.

So, the first takeaway is that the relationship was established from that press interaction that President Trump had and then Prime Minister Khan with the media yesterday that was more than 40 minutes long. It was clear that President Trump seemed to like Prime Minister Khan. He seemed very complimentary of him. Prime Minister Khan, it is clear that he has also enjoyed meeting President Trump. He, in his remarks at USIP today, said that he and his delegation were blown away by the meeting. He was very complimentary. At one point he said during his remarks, you know, thank God for President Trump that we're actually going to get to a resolution in Afghanistan. So, very complimentary, very solicitous of each other. So, that's sort of the first takeaway.

I think the second takeaway is -- the second major point of discussion was Afghanistan. So, it is important that the two sides put out statements about how Pakistan is helping in the Afghan peace process. And today, Prime Minister Khan, again in his statements at USIP, said we are on the same page, over and over again, on Afghanistan and President Trump said that Pakistan is helping a lot with the peace process. And again, the help being that Pakistan is helping bringing the Taliban to the table with the Afghan government and that progress has been made. That is going to be sort of reported to the public. So, Prime Minister Khan has brought along with him the Chief of Army Staff and the Director General of the ISI the Inter-Services Intelligence from Pakistan. And the idea is that they had to be brought along to discuss Afghanistan, because ultimately it's a security issue. So, I think that, you know, acknowledging Pakistan's help with Afghanistan that is considered a success.

President Trump also talked quite a bit about trade. You know, he was again, as I said, very complimentary not just of Khan, but also of Pakistan, Pakistani products. He said, you know, likely in terms that were exaggerated, that trade can be expanded 10 or 20 times more with Pakistan in this press interaction. That's unlikely to happen, but the fact of the matter is that the trade relationship between those two countries, if it can be increased, that would be considered a win for Pakistan.

I think one of the things that analysts had been speculating about was the renewal of aid -- that Khan might ask for a renewal of aid. Today, he said I didn't come here to ask for assistance. I came to ask for understanding, not assistance. That being said, President Trump also said that it's not off the table that renewal of security assistance might take place, and in fact that might be one of the wins. We don't know anything about whether that might happen yet or not.

On Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorist groups that might exist on Pakistani soil, President Trump, you know, sort of alluded to Prime Minister Khan that Pakistan had been duplicitous, perhaps even subversive -- he used that word -- in how it dealt with the U.S. versus the terrorist groups that it had on its soil. But he made it a direct point to say that was before you. So, he again, wanted to sort of highlight that he thinks that this is a new era and that he believes Pakistan's sincerity when Pakistan says we will not have any terrorist groups on Pakistani soil anymore. All of this has been done before. Pakistan always has said it won't have terrorist groups on its soil anymore. Whether it really, really means at this time, you know, Khan is trying to assert it does. He's trying to assert it is not in Pakistan's own interest to have these groups on its soil anymore.

Pakistan has this dangling sword that it's looking at, which is a gray listing by the Financial Action Task Force, and Pakistan does not want to be blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force for any sponsorship of terrorist groups or militant groups. And so, it wants the U.S. to possibly help with that. That's where the arrest of Hafiz Saeed last week also plays in.

Overall, the two leaders -- another interesting point that they connected on -- was ironically, Imran Khan was asked about, in recent months there has been a lot of media repression, in particular of any coverage of the opposition parties, and he was asked about the media situation and the censorship of the media. He asserted that Pakistan's media is free and that no one is treated worse than him by the Pakistani media. And President Trump chimed in and said, well you wouldn't believe how badly I'm treated, I'm treated worse than you are. And they sort of went back and forth on that. So, instead of that being something that President Trump or the U.S. government actually asked Khan about, this is something that they actually ended up connecting on. It was at USIP today, in fact, that Prime Minister Khan was taken to task a little bit more thoroughly on the issue of media oppression.

PITA: Alright, Madiha, thank you very much for being here and for explaining this to us.